



FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO HIRE: How Mayo Clinic Is Investing in Internships as a Talent Pipeline





LUCIA DANG

Lucia Dang is in high school, but as a Mayo Clinic intern and aspiring medical professional, she's had the opportunity to work alongside nursing staff to help answer patient call lights and take vitals. A senior in the Health Care Academy at Paradise Valley High School in Phoenix, Lucia is gaining real hands-on patient care experience on a medical-surgical unit 16 hours a week, always under the supervision of Mayo Clinic staff.

"I have so much empathy and compassion for these people [patients]," Lucia said. "You know, it's just another day for me, but they could be at their worst. Every little thing you do can really make a difference in their life, and that's just something that I really want to be a part of in the future and be able to impact people's lives in that way."

Mayo Clinic in Arizona sees Lucia and her peers as its future workforce as Arizona faces a critical shortage of skilled healthcare workers. Arizona will need to fill 132,800 new healthcare jobs over the next 10 years, and with a projected supply of only 56,800 new healthcare workers, the state may be facing a shortfall of 76,000 additional workers in healthcare alone. Based on critical pain points, Arizona healthcare employers, alongside education and workforce partners, are calling to expand the healthcare talent pipeline through a statewide career awareness campaign that is widely inclusive.¹

Mayo Clinic is one of a growing set of employers recognizing that offering paid, high-quality high school internships is not simply a community service, but a talent development strategy that builds a pipeline to entry-level positions and beyond. In partnership with ElevateEdAZ, an initiative of the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation, Mayo Clinic employs 16 interns from four school districts and recently lowered its minimum intern age — expanding access to qualified students like Lucia, who began her internship when she was 17.

"Our long-term goal is definitely to convert to hire because we want to see those students and early talent be a part of Mayo Clinic," said Ron Mack, Mayo Clinic Workforce Development Talent Solutions Specialist. "We believe that by investing in early talent, Mayo Clinic can foster loyalty and potentially reduce future recruitment costs."

This case study highlights how Mayo Clinic:

- ✓ Establishes program goals that speak to critical hiring pain points
- ✓ Identifies the right skills and duties for its interns
- ✓ Partners with an intermediary, ElevateEdAZ, to access a region-wide supply of work-ready interns with significant content knowledge
- ✓ Expands access by lowering the minimum age
- ✓ Builds paths to advancement to nursing careers beyond the entry level

High school internships are part of a more relevant model for American education, one that accelerates students' path to postsecondary credentials and careers and elevates classroom learning by connecting it to the workplace. Employers play an essential role in providing work-based learning from career exploration to preparation to training.² Internships sit on the more intensive end of that spectrum, and have been one of the more difficult types of experiences to provide at significant scale.

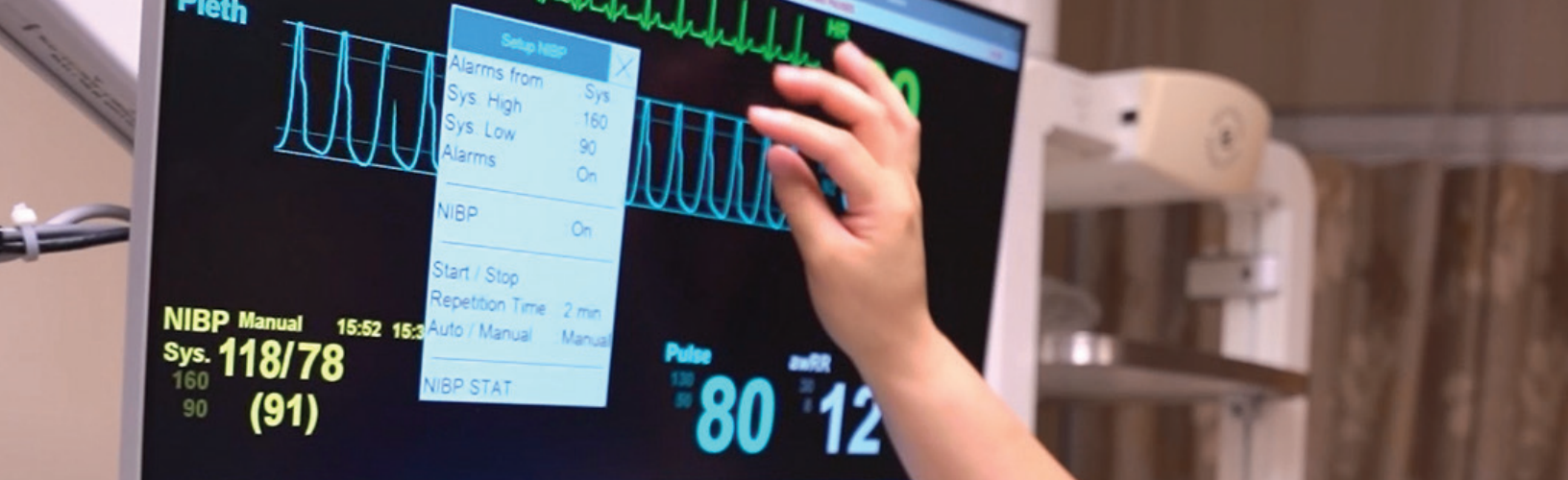
Nationally, high school internships are slightly on the rise. A survey by American Student Assistance found that 38% of businesses offered high school internships in 2023, up from 30% in 2018, though the share of students who can access these opportunities is quite low — the same survey in 2018 revealed just 2% of high school students had completed an internship. While giving back to the community was businesses' top reason for hosting school interns, they also named benefits to their talent development: 86% said high school interns strengthened their industry pipeline as a whole, 81% said they filled their employment pipeline with candidates from all backgrounds, and 77% said they used high school interns to build the pipeline for entry-level positions. Businesses also named challenges in managing high school intern programs, such as determining the work best suited for them, attracting qualified interns, scheduling around interns' availability, and finding interns with transportation to the workplace.³

To fill growing demands for skilled talent, many more employers must invest in cultivating the pipeline beginning in high school. And for that to happen, stakeholders must better define and document the business case for employers to provide meaningful, paid high school internships, as well as solutions to the barriers to expansion. This is the story of one employer, Mayo Clinic, that has:

- 1 Committed to developing local talent starting in high school**
- 2 Partnered with an intermediary that brokers internships with schools across the Greater Phoenix region**
- 3 Taken creative measures to increase access and build a path from high school to entry-level jobs to postsecondary education and career advancement**



DANNA RODRIGUEZ



IDENTIFYING A QUALIFIED AND INCLUSIVE TALENT PIPELINE

ElevateEdAZ, whose mission is to prepare Arizona students for college and career, first engaged Mayo Clinic in 2022 through the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation's workforce collaborative. Mayo Clinic agreed to pilot a couple of high school interns, which has grown into a program that supports Mayo Clinic's hiring pipeline for critical future workforce needs. Students aspiring to healthcare careers need to build their relationship with healthcare professionals, and to learn Mayo Clinic culture and standards of care, Ron Mack of Mayo Clinic said.

"If these students can be given the opportunity at Mayo Clinic or in healthcare, I think it will definitely help with the retention piece that so many healthcare providers speak to," Mack said. "These younger individuals are probably more likely to stay because this is their first opportunity."

In partnering with ElevateEdAZ, Mayo Clinic taps into an ecosystem of 21 high schools offering Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs aligned to high-wage, high-demand industries. The intern program is one aspect of ElevateEdAZ's larger body of work to develop accelerated pathways that enable high school students to take early college courses and earn credentials that Arizona employers value. In 2024, ElevateEdAZ supported 300 students to participate in an internship with 76 business partners. Students in ElevateEdAZ's intern pool have completed significant CTE coursework aligned with employer needs. A number of Mayo Clinic interns, including Lucia Dang, are simultaneously enrolled in a high school course to earn an industry-recognized healthcare certification.

"There was a misalignment and employers were saying that they're not finding the skills and the talent out there," said Isabel Gonzalez, Vice President of ElevateEdAZ. "Engaging the business community in providing internships and other work-based learning activities is not just a good thing to do — it's really supporting their goals of finding and retaining talent."

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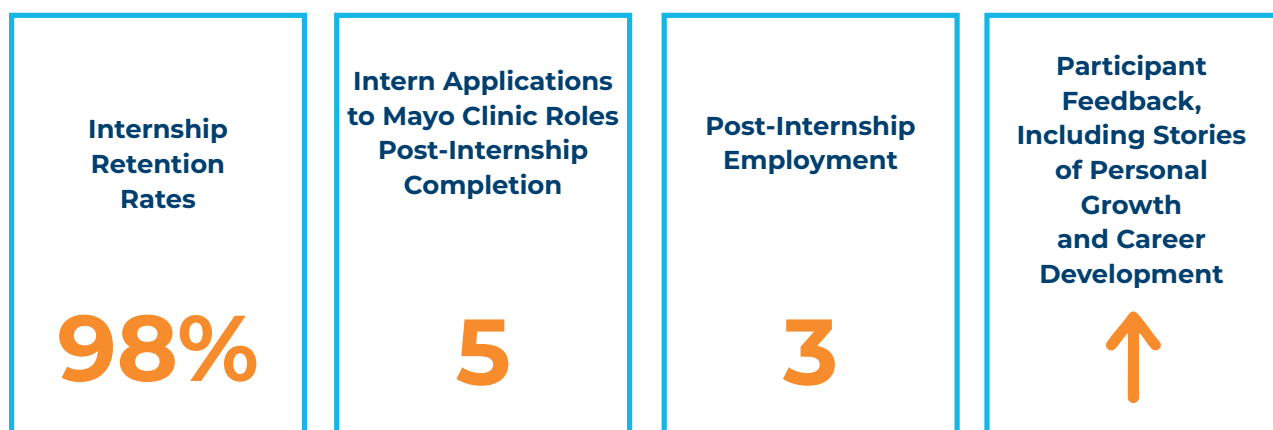
Internships as part of an education-to-career pathway

Before taking part in an ElevateEdAZ internship, students need to complete at least two consecutive CTE courses within the same pathway, which enables partnering employers to hire interns with interest and content knowledge in their field. ElevateEdAZ works with its partner school districts to expand opportunities for students to earn college credit while in high school, meaning that high school interns may be taking college courses during their internship.

For example, a student in Paradise Valley High School's Nursing Services program typically will have taken two introductory Health Care Pathways courses prior to an internship with a healthcare employer and may have taken the Health Care Assistant Clinic 1 course for college credit. A Paradise Valley student in the Bioscience program may be taking Molecular Cell Biology at the University of Arizona or Microbiology at Paradise Valley Community College.

Arizona's College and Career Readiness Indicators incentivize internships by giving high schools points for students who complete a CTE sequence, earn industry-recognized credentials, and complete 120 hours of internship.

Conversion to hire is not always immediate, given that high school interns may pursue higher education outside the region or state. But two years into the partnership, Mayo Clinic employs three former high school interns, all of whom are pursuing higher education while working at Mayo Clinic. The supervisors who have hired their interns are the program's best advocates, Mack said, demonstrating to executive leadership as well as peer supervisors the program's return on investment. **To measure success and secure continuing buy-in, the program tracks the following and is seeing early results:**



DEVELOPING A MEANINGFUL INTERNSHIP

Susan Launder is a Mayo Clinic nurse manager who oversees 94 staff on the medical-surgical unit where Lucia interns. Hiring interns for the inpatient setting was new for Mayo Clinic this year, and when approached with the opportunity, Launder led a work group of managers to identify a set of tasks a high school student could do for them. She wanted interns who had chosen a healthcare track and were enrolled in a CNA program at their high school. Interns partner on each shift with a patient care assistant (PCA) or nurse, and to meet licensure requirements and ensure patient safety, they cannot perform tasks independently. Launder will lead a review at year's end of which intern duties worked well and which need refinement.

"They work side by side with somebody so they learn how things are done, how they interact with patients, how to meet the day-to-day needs of what it would take to be a PCA on our unit," Launder said. "One of the key things for us is to see where they are in their CNA program and what skills have been checked off. So then maybe we could start incorporating those as we get a sign-off that they've completed those things in the program."

"As a manager, you're always a little nervous. How is staff going to embrace this person who's here to follow them around a lot? They're not somebody you can send off to go do a task. But Lucia is such a phenomenal person. She just fits in so well that everybody wants to take her under their wing. That's how we're going to grow our people and make them strong health-care professionals in the future."

Mayo Clinic places interns on units with critical hiring needs, such as medical-surgical, sterile processing, orthopedic, radiology, and administration. Students complete 120-240 hours over their senior year and have the flexibility to determine their schedule with their Mayo Clinic supervisor. Mayo Clinic pays interns \$15.54/hour, above the minimum wage of \$14.70, which they see as an investment in future hiring that can cost less than typical recruitment and training costs. About two-thirds of ElevateEdAZ's internship partners offer paid opportunities, a number the team is working to increase.

"It will increase your candidacy pool and a lot of our students, especially the underserved students, they will stick with their job and not pursue this amazing opportunity because they might be supporting their families and they need that additional source of income," said Grace Muhammad, business partnership coordinator at ElevateEdAZ. She tells employers: "You will be changing a student's life. They can continue with you, this could change their entire future, and they wouldn't be able to take the opportunity if it was unpaid."

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Susan Launder, Nurse Manager, Mayo Clinic



PARTNERING TO ACCESS WORK-READY INTERNS

Many employers tell ElevateEdAZ they're happy to hire high school interns, but they need assurance they are reliable, work ready and interview well. That's the work of ElevateEdAZ's school-based college and career coaches. ElevateEdAZ places a coach at each of its 21 partner high schools, with the goal of direct involvement in getting 20 students at each school hired into an internship and supporting successful completion. Coaching includes:

- ▣ **Demonstrating the value of internships to students**
- ▣ **Supporting resume development, interview skills, and professionalism**
- ▣ **Troubleshooting when interns need support on the job**

ElevateEdAZ also employs a five-person business partnership team that cultivates employer relationships, mitigates employer barriers to offering internships, secures student transportation to work sites — often through a transportation partner, HopSkipDrive⁴ — and serves as the first point of contact should issues arise.

Common growth areas for high school interns include communicating with supervisors and email etiquette. The model enables intern challenges to be addressed early through a feedback loop between the employer, business partnership coordinator, college and career coach, CTE teacher, and student.

“Last year I had some supervisors reach out to me and that’s where I learned that not all students understand how to request a day off,” said Leticia Gomez, the ElevateEdAZ coach at Metro Tech High School. “So I added that into the professionalism workshop.”

LOWERING THE MINIMUM AGE

Like many employers, Mayo Clinic initially required high school interns to be 18, which limited the candidate pool significantly, especially in the fall semester. The program was missing out on qualified high school seniors, and Mack worked with legal, human resources, and unit leaders to define an internship for 17-year-olds that includes appropriate supervision and age-appropriate tasks, complies with licensure and labor laws, and ensures patient safety. Some departments, such as Research, still require interns to be 18, but the policy change opened the doors for the intern program to grow. A key principle that enabled the change is that Mayo Clinic interns, whether 18 or younger, always work under direct supervision.

The innovation has spurred change among other employers in the sector. Two smaller healthcare clinics that connected with ElevateEdAZ last year initially were firm on wanting interns to be 18. After Muhammad shared that Mayo Clinic was able to lower the minimum age to attract more candidates and keep qualified high school students engaged in healthcare, both clinics lowered their age requirement to 17.

“Ron Mack is a perfect example of someone who says, ‘That’s not a barrier, that’s just problem solving,’” Muhammad said. “Let me see how I can lower the age limit. Let me do everything in my power to do so. And they have set such an incredible example for other healthcare organizations throughout the Valley to partner with us to lower the age limits, to get these students in the door.”



LUCIA'S STORY

Lucia Dang, a Mayo Clinic intern, is a senior at Paradise Valley High School who will earn her CNA certification this spring. After graduation, she plans to major in Biomedical Sciences at Arizona State University and continue to medical school or Physician Assistant school.



"I often think, if this were my family member—my mom or dad—I'd want them to receive the best care possible, and so I strive to ensure that the care I provide is above and beyond. At Mayo, everyone is incredibly focused on their patients, and being surrounded by people who share that same value really strengthens my own. It motivates me to be a better healthcare worker.

I'm typically assigned to work alongside a PCA, where we start by taking morning vital signs, responding to call lights, and following a set routine for each patient's hygiene and overall well-being. I always make it a point to ask, "What can I do for you?" and focus on tasks that fall within my scope. Patient needs can vary—sometimes they may require help with simple requests, such as adjusting the TV or ordering food, while other times they may be experiencing pain and need much more care. In those cases, I promptly communicate with the nursing staff, reassure the patient that their care is a priority, and assist in any way I can. Patient safety is always a key concern, so before leaving a patient's room, I make sure their call light is within reach, their bed is properly positioned, and they have the privacy they need. At Mayo Clinic, patient-centered care is a core value, and I've observed that it is consistently emphasized throughout the organization.

I think, for my generation, we sometimes struggle with talking to people we perceive as authority figures. But being here, you're really treated as an equal. This experience has taught me how to communicate effectively. I've had to express my patients' needs clearly, relay that to them, and also communicate with the nurses I work with. As a result, I've become much more comfortable speaking up, engaging with many age groups, and boosting my confidence by advocating for the patients.

What makes this internship truly exceptional are the people. I have built strong connections and meaningful relationships with my coworkers, and they are always eager to teach me. Every time I arrive, the nurses greet me by name and are consistently excited to show me new things and share their knowledge. Mayo offers endless opportunities to learn, and the team constantly motivates me to expand my knowledge. Every day I come in, I always take home something new with me."



INVESTING IN A PIPELINE TO ADVANCEMENT

To encourage entry-level workers to advance toward highly skilled, high-wage careers, Mayo Clinic's Career Investment Program enables employees with one year of tenure to apply for funds to pay their tuition, typically for a bachelor's degree in a high-need area, if they commit to remaining with Mayo Clinic two years post-program.

Lauder reflected that to prepare for the widening shortage of nurses, Mayo Clinic is making adjustments to support nurses through more patient care assistants. Likewise, they are supporting PCAs in their career advancement to nursing. That trajectory can begin in high school, supporting the goals of the student and the organization simultaneously.

"What we often see is people who have started as PCAs become our strongest nurses because they understand all the aspects of care so much better," Lauder said. "The activities of daily living, the bathing, getting patients moving, the things that they can do are truly what helps our patients get better, to go home faster. So it's a key component of care. I think if we can teach high schoolers and bring them in at that level and let them see the value they bring as a PCA, it's going to build the relationships between nurses and PCAs as they continue to grow in their healthcare journey."

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Susan Lauder, Nurse Manager, Mayo Clinic

DANNA'S STORY

Following her Mayo Clinic internship, Danna Rodriguez was hired as a patient care assistant in the cardiovascular progressive care unit. She graduated from the nursing pathway at Metro Tech High School in 2024 with a nursing assistant certification and is in her first year at Arizona State University completing nursing prerequisites. Danna aspires to become a Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA).



Danna began community health work as a ninth-grader while researching an area of community need for an English class assignment. That project led Danna, living in a low-income neighborhood of predominantly Hispanic, uninsured residents, to reach out to the University of Arizona's mobile health unit to organize free health screenings for her community.

"My [intern] position was a sterile processing attendant. What we did in there was help put all the equipment in organized stations in order for them to be sterilized properly. My position helped the people who organized those trays for the operating room have all the materials that they needed for that specific surgery, and they make sure that what the surgeon needs, like any special preference that they have, is in there too.

It was super fun, because it was a great learning experience. You're never doing it alone. You always have somebody you can ask questions to or when in doubt, and I think that Mayo does an extremely good job allowing opportunities for students — for anyone starting really — to have an opportunity to grow.

At Mayo, I've had several opportunities to meet 1:1 with a CRNA when caring for a patient. I see the empathy, I see the connection that they make with their patients before surgery. And I want to be that person to provide that relief because obviously, when a patient is going into surgery they have all these possibilities in their head.

There was one specific circumstance when I was asked to be with the patient as the "sitter," and he was about to go into a procedure. And the CRNA came in and she introduced herself. She went over the entire procedure — what was going to happen, what medications were going to be an option and if that didn't work, the second option. She provided all kinds of alternatives, and she provided comfort. She said, 'I am going to be with you, right next to you, and if anything goes wrong, I will be there. I will take care of you.' So that's exactly what I want to do."

GETTING STARTED: ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

Articulate the business case.

Identify clear goals for the program and set metrics to demonstrate impact to secure and maintain buy-in, Ron Mack of Mayo Clinic advised. Think of high school interns as a real pipeline to hire, name the specific occupations they could fill, and use internal data on recruitment and turnover costs to make the case. Leverage supervisors who have hired former interns to advocate for the program.

Partner with an intermediary.

A partner like ElevateEdAZ streamlines the process of working with individual schools, finding qualified interns, coaching them for success, securing transportation, and troubleshooting individual business needs. As employers increasingly need strategies to grow local talent, and more states emphasize work-based learning in their K-12 systems, a growing number of chambers of commerce, workforce boards, and community-based organizations are adopting this brokering role nationwide.⁵

Focus on meaningful, hands-on experiences.

Colleagues will see the value of interns if they're filling real needs. Consider what high-value tasks a high school student could do, and which are aligned with skills that local high school students are learning in their Career and Technical Education programs. Select supervisors who see high school students as assets and provide them with training to cultivate intern skills.

Identify and remove barriers to equitable participation.

Work with stakeholders within the business, at partner schools, and with students themselves to understand barriers in your context, whether age, preparation, or transportation, and design the program to address them. Investing in paid internships increases the candidate pool and reduces recruitment costs down the line.

Try it with just one.

When businesses question whether a high school intern could add value, Grace Muhammad of ElevateEdAZ encourages them to try hiring just one. "They surprise businesses," she said. "They come in with really fresh perspectives and ideas, and they're super motivated. And then that mindset starts to shift. 'Oh my gosh. Well, they came in with a great idea. They came in with great energy. Sometimes they even change the work dynamic of what our office looked like just having this energy in the room.'"

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Grace Muhammad, *Business Partnership Coordinator*, ElevateEdAZ

Danna Rodriguez, *Patient Care Assistant*, Mayo Clinic

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Ron Mack,
*Workforce Development
Talent Solutions
Specialist, Mayo Clinic*

ENDNOTES

¹ [Arizona Statewide Healthcare Workforce Plan](#). Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation, 2024.

² [Employer Work-Based Learning Guide](#), Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation, 2022.

³ [Building Bridges Between Education and Industry: Youth Work-Based Learning as Talent Development Strategy](#). American Student Assistance, 2024.

⁴ [HopSkipDrive Fuels High School Internship Program, Driving Student Success in Phoenix](#)

⁵ [Keys to Scale: How to Grow the Impact of Education-to-Career Pathway Intermediaries](#). Education Strategy Group, 2024.