



Preparing for a Career in the Health Professions:

Activities



For whom is this brochure intended?

Any U of M undergraduate interested in applying to a health professions school, including:

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| Allopathic Medicine | Chiropractic Medicine |
| Osteopathic Medicine | Genetics Counseling |
| Dentistry | Nursing |
| Veterinary Medicine | Physician Assistant |
| Podiatric Medicine | Physical Therapy |
| Pharmacy | Optometry |

What will the admissions committees look for when I apply to professional school?

- Strong academic performance
- Involvement in extracurricular activities
- Demonstrated commitment to the health professions, with an emphasis on patient care
- Strong admissions exams scores (MCAT, DAT, GRE, PCAT, OAT)
- Strong letters of recommendation

What kind of clinical experiences are most important?

Health professions schools want to know two main things:

- You have a mature view of what this profession is about, including a clear idea of how health professionals spend their days.

- You are capable of working with animals or people who are not well or are challenged in some way and, further, that you are comfortable with that contact.

In order to demonstrate these two points, you need to interact both with people in your chosen field and patients. Consider these possibilities:

- Shadow a professional during the school year or a break (asking your own health care providers about shadowing or for referrals is often a good way to find these opportunities)
- Volunteer, looking for those experiences that will give you substantive contact with patients and health care professionals
- Volunteer with a hospice organization or in a nursing home, acting as a companion to their clients
- Work with developmentally disabled children at a summer camp or at an after school program
- Deliver meals to patients with AIDS... volunteer at planned parenthood... counsel people at a crisis center... work in a homeless shelter... the possibilities are endless!

The most important aspect of the activities you choose is to participate in services that are important to you and help define what makes you unique.

How important is research experience?

The answer to this question depends on the type of career you plan to pursue. An understanding of how the research process works will be valuable in any health professions field, but it is only crucial if you are entering a program that has research as a main focus, particularly the MD or DO/PhD.



If you plan to apply to one of these programs, you will not be considered a competitive candidate without a substantial amount of research experience related directly to the PhD field you plan to pursue. A knowledge of research techniques, an understanding of the challenges and rewards of research, and exposure to the lifestyle of a researcher are all important.

However, while research is a worthy activity for anyone entering a career in the health professions, remember it cannot and should not take the place of clinical experience. While you can be admitted to these programs without research experience, you will not be admitted without clinical exposure.

In what other activities should I be involved?

Since so much of being a health care professional is about working directly with people, professional schools want to know that you are a well-rounded person who can interact with a range of people and groups. Therefore, they encourage you to become involved in activities, whether or not they are science-related. Follow your passion! Join the band, an a cappella group, or a dance company; join a cultural organization; become an RA; join an intercollegiate or intramural athletic team; become involved in student government... again, the list is endless.

What is important is that the activities you choose show your passion. Hopefully, that will mean that you stay involved over time and ideally that you would take on a formal or informal leadership role in that organization.

What will your activities say about you?

- You are committed to a topic over time
- You are willing to stand out, be noticed, and act as a leader
- You can manage your time, successfully balancing academics and co-curricular pursuits
- You have a range of interests that will allow you to connect to patients as people
- You are committed to serving your community, both on and off campus

If I am taking off time between college and professional school, what type of jobs or activities should I pursue?

Professional schools know that after this time off, you are specializing in a field for the long term. Therefore, they are very understanding about students exploring new areas before they start their professional education. Feel free to do something non-health related. Think about joining Teach for America, the Peace Corps, or similar opportunities. Enter the business world. Work on your novel. As long as you are able to explain your thought process in an interview, any of these choices are valid.

→ Be creative:

Form your own group when none exists!



Of course, this is also the time to strengthen any areas of your application that need boosting: take additional coursework in the sciences, seek out clinical experience, or work in a research lab. Your Pre-health Advisor can help you evaluate your experiences to-date to make suggestions in this area.

We offer one word of caution during your time off: a trip around the world or work abroad might be the perfect way to spend time off, as long as you will still be available to interview at schools and have an easy way to keep in communication with them. If you do plan to travel, include your itinerary on your supplemental applications to help coordinate the interview process.



I've accumulated many experiences. Whom should I ask for recommendations, and when should I make that request?

While you must have recommendations from instructors who can talk about your **performance in the classroom**, recommendations from supervisors, advisors, or coaches are also important in helping professional schools learn about you. Avoid recommendations from peers, but anyone else who supervised you in an activity is appropriate. Select people who know you well, who can talk about your level of commitment and your interaction with peers and/or patients. They should be able to put any challenges you faced into perspective.

If you have an ongoing relationship, you should wait until your application year to request that recommendation. Otherwise, ask the person to put a recommendation on file in the Career Center as soon as your formal relationship or activity has ended, while their memory is freshest.

How can I get the most out of the activities I choose?

When approaching any activity, try to be intentional and reflective. Think about choices you are making. Why did you choose this activity?

What do these activities say about you, your priorities, and your passions? How might you describe this experience to an interviewer?

To help you keep track of your activities and to see patterns in your involvement, we suggest you keep an activity journal.



- Log your hours and note your activities each day
- Note anything out of the ordinary that strikes you each day and **also** note your reactions
- As you observe those around you, whom do you admire, whom would you most like to model, and who disappointed you – and most importantly, why?
- In a health care setting, how do you feel interacting with patients or clients? What are some of your immediate reactions to them, and what emotions do you feel after that immediate reaction?

Seek out conversations with health care providers.

- How do they spend their time?
- What do they like and dislike about their jobs?
- What keeps them coming to work each day? What motivates them?
- Does the job fit their expectations, both in terms of day-to-day work and in terms of their quality of life?
- What about their jobs is different than they expected? What surprised them?
- What do they see as the pressing ethical issues in the profession?
- If they were going to start over, would they choose the same career path? Why or why not?

Not only will this journal help you confirm or question your personal choices, it will help you when it is time to apply to professional school. You'll have a wealth of information to draw from as you write personal statements and prepare for your interviews.



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