

Gilmore Guide to
SHADOWING HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Shadowing healthcare professionals is one way that pre-health students can educate themselves about the realities of medicine and healthcare. The work and life of healthcare professionals will differ based on the role, degree of specialization, populations served, area of the country, and work setting. Health professional programs (MD, DO, PA, DDS, DPM, DPT, OD, PharmD, etc.) expect applicants to have extensive first-hand exposure to the field. To be a successful applicant down the road, it is imperative that you demonstrate your knowledge of the demands and realities of your chosen career.

OBSERVATIONAL EXPERIENCE vs. INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE: Shadowing is the primary way to get *observational experience* in healthcare. *Interactive experience* is any activity in which you are directly interacting with or helping people, patients, or a specific population. Shadowing is a great way to get started with figuring out your path; however, it should never be your ONLY experience in healthcare. Compliment shadowing with volunteer positions, jobs, and/or research experience that will allow you be in a helping role. The overall goal is to develop the highly valued [AAMC COMPETENCIES](#).

EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS: Don't just look at one profession or stop after a couple of shadowing experiences! There are countless careers in healthcare and all pre-health students should explore multiple options. This is part of being an informed candidate down the road. Vary your experiences over time, whether by observing various specialty areas, career paths, or specific populations with which you may want to work. The more experience you gain, the more confident you will be in your career choice. Your experiences must allow you to fully articulate *why* you have chosen medicine, dentistry, optometry, pharmacy, audiology, PA, public health, etc. over other career paths available to you. You will not be able to do this if you have only looked at one or two options! For a full overview of options, start with www.explorehealthcareers.org.

GET AWAY FROM "CHECKLIST" MENTALITY: With the exception of PA programs, graduate and professional schools are not going to have specific hour requirements for healthcare exposure. Remember, it is not necessarily how long you shadow, volunteer, etc. that matters, but the quality of the experience and the impact it has on you and your professional goals. There is no such thing as too much experience, so start early and build it over time.

TRACKING EXPERIENCE: It is often said that the difference between a good candidate and a great candidate is a student's ability to *reflect* on their path and experiences. Keep a record of dates, hours spent, lessons learned, who and what you observed, etc. REFLECT in writing as you go. Ask yourself:

- **What did you learn from your experiences?**
- **How did you change as a result?**
- **What surprised you when you were able to compare the idea vs. reality of medicine?**
- **What specifically do you like or not like about the day-to-day life of a particular profession?**
- **What traits do you have that would make the profession a good fit for you?**
- **What aspects of the profession might be challenging for you?**
- **How does this profession compare to others you have observed or considered?**

It is not just about having an interest in something, but whether or not *your* passions, interests, personality, etc. match the profession. **Keep track of ALL experiences**, observations, and personal reactions (ePortfolio available through MyQ is a great format, but chose whatever works best for you).

This will help you reflect on the realities of the profession so that you can strongly articulate your interest and motivation in the future (hint, hint...this also makes application time much easier). All experience is self-reported at the time you apply, so take responsibility to track early and often.

ADVICE FOR GETTING STARTED

- 1. Be proactive.** You will be hard pressed to find formal shadowing “programs” at hospitals or other clinical settings. The vast majority of shadowing experiences are found by proactively contacting professionals and asking about availability for shadowing. Due to HIPAA regulations, not all organizations or professionals can allow shadowing, so don’t be discouraged if you get a “NO” along the way. You may have to contact several people before you find an opportunity, so be persistent (but professional). AAMC has fantastic “fact sheets,” such as, “[Shadowing a Doctor](#)” that you can access through their [Aspiring Docs](#) website.
- 2. Be prepared.** Have an “elevator speech” and professional email inquiry prepared ahead of time. Always address others using professional titles. Concisely introduce yourself and provide some background about you (major, year in college, possibly professional interests). You can then *politely ask* if the contact would be willing to let you shadow them in order to learn more about their profession. See [here](#) for a guide to preparing an elevator pitch.
- 3. Start with your “warm” or primary contacts.** As with any type of networking, you will want to first contact those around you who you know personally or with whom you have common affiliations, interests, or contacts. Examples include: family, friends, neighbors, current or past healthcare providers, Quinnipiac alumni, or professionals with which you work or volunteer. Start with asking for one or two days – the worst they can say is, “no!” Length of shadowing experiences can range from one day to more extended periods of time. This will depend upon the practitioner’s availability, type of practice, specialization area and restrictions with patient confidentiality. Asking for one day is a great way to start as it is not a huge commitment by either you or the person you are contacting. If it leads to more shadowing, even better!
- 4. Secondary contacts.** Once you have reached out to primary contacts and have done some initial shadowing or informational interviewing, you can ask those professionals for suggestions of additional people you could contact to expand upon your shadowing experiences. Ask if they have any colleagues in other specialty areas or professional tracks you may be interested in. These secondary contacts may be more willing to help you out if you were referred by a colleague that they work with or know well.
- 5. Online searching.** Another way to find people to contact for shadowing opportunities is to search the online directories of local hospitals, clinics, professional associations, or healthcare systems. LinkedIn is another possible resource. Professional associations sometimes even have mentor networks or search engines to find people in a specific region (go to www.explorehealthcareers.org for easy links to national associations; do a google search for regional or state professional associations). Remember that getting a “yes” from someone who isn’t a “warm contact” will be more of a challenge, so don’t get discouraged if someone is not responsive. If you get declined, just move on to the next contact on your list.

6. **Professionalism is crucial.** Always be courteous and grateful to anyone who helps you out along the way! Read up on professionalism and business etiquette before contacting anyone. Keep in mind that today's shadowing opportunity may lead to additional opportunities or positive references down the road. If you need assistance with networking techniques, drafting professional emails or other professional interactions, reach out to your career counselor for assistance (*Rick DelVecchio in College of Arts & Sciences; Cindy Christie in School of Health Sciences*). Be sure to:

- Dress professionally
- Arrive on time
- Introduce yourself using your first and last name
- Have a firm handshake
- Use proper titles when addressing professionals – when in doubt, chose formality
- Ask questions (Google “informational interview” for ideas)
- Express gratitude and send a follow-up thank you note

7. **Sample Email Inquiry.** Do not just cut and paste this! Personalize and keep it professional.

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. _____:

My name is Bob Bobcat, and I am currently a _____ [year in school] at Quinnipiac University. I am in the process of exploring career options in healthcare and I am very interested in the field of _____ (e.g., dentistry, occupational therapy, pediatric oncology, etc.). I am in the process of seeking out opportunities for shadowing in order to better understand what it is like to be a _____. I found your e-mail through the _____ website (Or, alternatively, I was given your contact information by your colleague, _____). If you are willing and your hospital/clinic/office allows students to shadow, I would welcome an opportunity to observe you work for a day.

I realize that you are busy and that your time is valuable. If you have any questions or concerns, you can reach me by e-mail or phone (###-###-####).

Thank you for your help.

*Best Regards,
Bob*

8. **If the answer is “No.”** Chances are, you will probably get turned down before someone says yes. Don't get discouraged—this is a normal part of the process. There are ways to leverage a “no” into other opportunities. As a general rule, always thank the professional for responding, even if you don't get the answer you were hoping for. This is good for relationship building, which might open up other opportunities down the line. If it feels appropriate, consider responding to inquire about the possibility of an informational interview or other colleagues they may have in the field.

Request names of other contacts in the field:

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. _____:

Thank you for taking the time to respond to my e-mail. I understand why shadowing it is not an option, but I very much appreciate you following up on my request. Do you have any friends or colleagues in the field of _____ at organizations where shadowing may be allowable? Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Thank you again for your help.

Kind Regards,

Bob

Request informational interview:

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. _____:

Thank you for taking the time to respond to my email. I know you must be quite busy. In lieu of shadowing, would you be open to having a short conversation over coffee or tea (my treat!)? I would love the opportunity to ask you a few questions about your work and possibly get advice on how to prepare for a career in _____.

Thank you again for your help.

Kind Regards,

Bob