



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY Health Professions Advisory Office

Observation / “Shadowing” & Informational Interviewing FAQs

1. How can I connect with a health professional for observation / shadowing or an informational interview for career insight?

See Steps A-E below to assist you.

A. Start with your *existing* network. Ask yourself:

- Do you or does someone you already know have an existing connection to a healthcare professional?
Brainstorm: friends, roommates, neighbors, communities you are involved in (on or off campus), co-workers, family members, acquaintances through hobbies, etc.
- Have you visited a healthcare professional as a patient (or a family member, etc.)?
Brainstorm: your hometown provider(s), immediate or surrogate family/loved ones who have health conditions, etc.

A respectful, professional conversation can often lead to a valuable connection or referral to a healthcare provider, especially when you’ve made a strong impression and demonstrated professionalism.

B. Begin to volunteer or work in a healthcare setting. Get to know the healthcare professionals who work there.

- Volunteering or working in a clinic / hospital gives you direct exposure to healthcare environments and professionals.
- Even if your role brings you into contact with professionals outside your intended field (e.g., you're interested in physical therapy but mostly interact with nurses in the ER), take the opportunity to build relationships with them.
- As you get to know them, ask thoughtful questions and learn from them.
- Next, ask them to connect you with their colleagues in your field of interest and see if they would be willing to introduce you. Remember, providers know providers. No matter what the results, always be respectful.

C. Join a VU pre-health related student organization.

Many VU student clubs collaborate with healthcare professionals and may offer built-in opportunities for networking opportunities. Some have existing VU contacts that might help members gain additional professional exposure with informational interviews or possibly develop into a lead to observe / shadow them.

D. Connect with Vanderbilt alumni on LinkedIn.

Connect with VU mentors via [VU Commodore Compass](#) network or use LinkedIn to find VU graduates working in healthcare. Alumni are often open to connecting with students from their alma mater, *if* you demonstrate professionalism and patience in the overall process. If they are not interested, that is okay. They might already be mentoring other students. Please thank them for their time.

E. Use hospital or clinic directories to identify professionals.

You can search online directories at clinics / hospitals to find contact information for physicians, PAs, nurses, physical therapists, etc. and other healthcare providers.

- Don't be afraid to cold-email or call—it may feel uncomfortable, and it might take time, but many students successfully find opportunities this way.
- *Tip:* Start by requesting an informational interview instead of immediately asking to observe /shadow. It helps build rapport and gives the professional a chance to get to know you before considering potentially a longer-term observation / shadowing opportunity.

2. What is the hospital / clinic policies for observations / shadowing?

All hospital and clinic systems will **each have their own processes and policies** for observations / shadowing.

Note: *If* you are specifically trying to observe / shadow at a Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC)-affiliated facility or with a VUMC-affiliated healthcare provider, please visit:

- vanderbilt.edu/hpao/experience and review “What is observation / “shadowing”?”
- Next, select “Are you a Vanderbilt University undergraduate student? Interested in the Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) - Vanderbilt Observational Experience (VOE)? [Learn more here](#)” for full details and instructions.

If you're interested in shadowing outside of a Vanderbilt University Medical Center (*any non-VUMC-affiliated facility*), you will need to contact providers individually / directly for their specific healthcare facilities process and policies for observation / shadowing, *if allowed*.

Keep in mind that observation / shadowing opportunities may be limited at some facilities (due to large volume of requests, health/patient safety concerns, fluctuating/rising infections, etc.) Consider starting with informational interviews or exploring virtual shadowing options during the time it may take to be approved for in-person observation / shadowing. If not, consider working towards other opportunities such as healthcare volunteering or gaining a healthcare training/certification credential to use towards a direct, hands-on patient care experience instead.

3. How should I ask a health professional if I can observe / shadow or speak with them?

Many healthcare professionals are glad to support students, especially when you clearly explain *why* you're reaching out. Here's how to make a respectful and effective request:

- **Be specific about *why* you're contacting them.** Mention how you found them—maybe someone recommended them, or they work in a field you're interested in.
- **Introduce yourself.** Briefly share where you go to school, any relevant experience, and your career interests or goals.
- **Make a clear request.** Ask if they'd be willing to speak with you (in person or virtually) for 20–30 minutes, or if they'd consider letting you observe / shadow them.
- **Be courteous and flexible.** Acknowledge their busy schedule and thank them for any time or help they can offer—even if it's just a reply to your message.

Tip: If someone says “no” or does not respond, please do not take it personally. Many professionals have limited availability as they often mentor professionals already in the field. Stay positive and a “yes” will likely come with time and effort.

If it does not happen, please do not be discouraged. There are many ways to demonstrate commitment towards the healthcare field and industry. Review the HPAO Healthcare Industry Exposure & Healthcare Industry Experience sections under “Experience & Opportunities” to assist you.

HPAO has a free [sample](#) email template on how to ask a professional about observation / shadowing opportunities. **See the HPAO “Experiences & Opportunities – Observation & Informational Interviewing” section for access to this resource.**

4. How can I grow / expand my network overall?

Focus on *broadening* your exposure rather than spending all your time in one setting with one provider. Instead of observing / shadowing the same health professional for many hours, aim to connect with multiple professionals across different roles and settings.

Here is how to do that:

- After each information interview or observation / shadowing, ask if they can connect you with a colleague, perhaps someone in another department or clinic who may also be open to meeting *if you genuinely have additional questions to better understand why this specific healthcare professional role is a lifetime calling (for you).*
- When reaching out to a new contact, it's often best to start with a brief informational interview. This builds rapport and may naturally lead to a shadowing opportunity.
- Also, don't limit yourself to only professionals in your intended field. Speaking with those in different healthcare roles can help you:

- Understand the dynamics of interprofessional healthcare teams.
- Gain perspective on a range of career paths (over 250+ healthcare professional roles).
- Clarify and self-reflect *specifically why* you would serve best in the role you are pursuing.
- Build a diverse network. It takes time, but it's one of the most valuable steps you can take as a future healthcare professional.

5. What is Virtual Shadowing?

Virtual shadowing is another accessible way to explore a healthcare profession. It typically involves joining a Zoom session or watching a YouTube Live or recent video recording where a healthcare provider discusses their career or walks through a clinical case. Sometimes you'll have the chance to ask questions, but not always.

While virtual shadowing is a great introduction to the field, keep in mind that most health professional programs will also highly recommend you evolve to have some *in-person* clinical / hospital exposure (volunteering, etc.) or healthcare work experience (medical assistant, CNA, EMT, etc.) before you apply.

Here are some virtual shadowing opportunities to check out. *Note: Some might be live, and some might be pre-recorded.*

- [Dental Shadowers](#)
- [eShadowing with Medical School Headquarters](#)
- [Genomic Health Care Simulations](#)
- [HEAL Clinical Education Network](#)
- [Hearts for Health](#)
- [Master Genetic Counselor Series](#)
- [MedSchool Coach Beyond Shadowing](#)
- [Motivate MD](#)
- [Neurosurgical Grand Rounds](#)
- [Physician Assistant Shadowing Online](#)
- [Pre-Health Shadowing](#) (wide range of professions)
- [Teleshadowing](#) (physician shadowing)
- [Webshadowers](#) (physician shadowing)
- [Virtualshadowing](#) (Wide range of professions)

This is just a starting point. Explore professional association accounts on YouTube, Instagram, and other social media areas for more opportunities. Podcasts are also a great way to learn about different healthcare professions and roles from credible healthcare national or state-based association-based sources as well.

6. Can I talk about virtual shadowing and informational interviewing on a health professional application?

Yes! Professional programs want to see that you've taken the time to understand the field and are genuinely committed to pursuing it versus so many professional healthcare roles (over 250+). Participating in virtual shadowing and conducting informational interviews shows initiative and curiosity, and helps you learn more about the roles within a healthcare team.

These experiences often involve in-depth conversations with professionals, making them a great complement to in-person observation / shadowing and/or demonstrating other healthcare industry experiences (*example: direct, hands-on patient care (clinical) experience, research, summer programs, etc.*)

If you are unable to observe / shadow due to various factors, *don't worry!* Consider this another way to *start* the healthcare exploration industry exposure process.

7. Is shadowing (observations) required to apply to a healthcare professional program?

Often no. However, it depends on your *specific* healthcare profession (PA, PT, physician, etc.) and individual professional school admissions programs' current requirements. Please be sure to research your specific professional schools (we suggest you start with researching 3-5) admissions requirements of your top-choice schools *to understand what is required* versus what is recommended.

Medical School: While most medical schools do not *require* shadowing for admission, it can be one way to demonstrate your exposure to the healthcare field.

Athletic Training to Veterinary Medicine (A-Z) Schools: Other professional school health programs—such as those for physician assistants, physical therapists, or occupational therapists—might require a minimum number of observation / shadowing hours to apply, though admissions requirements vary widely. *If they do, it is commonly a 20 to 100-hour range.*

Overall, no matter how much you have “shadowed” or not, health professional programs admissions committees want to see that applicants understand the day-to-day responsibilities of the role they're pursuing, recognize *why* it's the right long-term path for them versus so many other callings of healthcare services, and that you are truly aware of the challenges and realities that come with working in a variety of healthcare settings.

Keep in mind that observations / shadowing is only one way to demonstrate commitment to the profession. When you shadow, you are not allowed to do anything except observe, *which is the most passive of ways to demonstrate commitment* towards healthcare calling in comparison to

other more active involvement (volunteering, direct-hands on patient care experience work, healthcare-based community advocacy, research, etc.)

8. How long should I observe / shadow for?

Once you find a healthcare professional willing to let you observe / shadow, ask how much time they recommend or confirm the clinic / hospital policies or observation limits. Some may have a set process or protocol in place already providers must follow.

Shadowing experiences can range from a one-day visit to a few hours per week over several weeks or months. We encourage you to spend as much time as the provider is comfortable with. However, please be respectful of their time and their clinic's policies.

That said, quality and variety matter more than your total hours. Shadowing multiple professionals in different settings (if that organically works out) gives you a broader perspective of the field than spending many hours with one provider in one setting. However, this might not always be possible. *Please know it is okay to focus on other demonstrations of commitment towards the healthcare industry beyond observation / shadowing alone.*

Note: Shadowing is not about determining your specialty at this time, but an overall sense of if the general role, duties and responsibilities as a provider (physician, PA, optometrist, veterinarian, etc.) is truly a lifetime calling versus other healthcare professional roles (over 250+) – in comparison.

Once you get into professional school, *you will often change your mind several times*. Often you will also have another level of access to explore specialties and sub-specialties in your chosen field.

Some professional programs might require 20–100 shadowing hours, while others don't have a set requirement but still expect you to demonstrate that you've explored the profession through shadowing, informational interviews or volunteering or direct, hands-on patient care experience in a volunteer/work capacity. However, it depends on your *specific* healthcare profession (PA, PT, physician, etc.) and individual professional school admissions programs' current requirements. Please be sure to research each of your specific professional schools first. Start with 3-5 schools (initially) admissions requirements of your top-choice schools to understand what is required versus what is recommended. There is a difference.

9. If I have recently been approved to observe / shadow, what are some tips?

- **Know the rules:** Every hospital or clinic has its own policies. Learn these before you start.
- **Dress professionally:** Think business casual—slacks, button-down shirts, blouses, closed-toe shoes, etc. If needed, visit the [Vanderbilt Commodore Closet](#) for free attire.

- **Be respectful:** Ask questions between patient visits, not during. Prepare thoughtful questions in advance.
- **Maintain confidentiality:** You may be introduced to patients, but some may not want you in the room. Respect that and always keep patient information private.
- **Plan ahead:** Arrive at least 15 minutes early. Use local transit tools such as [WE GO](#), which is free for all full-time and part-time Vanderbilt University students if you don't have a car.

10. What are some potential questions that I might need to be prepared to ask prior to scheduling an informational interview?

Below are some questions that you might ask. *Please be sure to come up with your own questions* as well. Here are sample questions to guide your conversation:

Work Environment & Necessary Skills

- How would you describe your work environment?
- Can you describe what a typical day looks like?
- What challenges do you often face?
- What skills are most important in your role?
- What do you spend most of your time doing each day/week?
- What kinds of problems/decisions do you face during your workday?
- What are the most important skills you use every day?
- What makes a person successful in your position?

Career Path

- Tell me about your journey towards this career calling?
- How did you holistically prepare for professional school?
- How does this work affect your personal life?

Advice & Professional Mentorship

- What did you look for in *thoughtfully* selecting a professional school?
- Are there things you wish you had known or investigated sooner when you first researched and selected professional school programs?
- Upon your entry into professional school and/or the profession, what do you wish you knew earlier?
- Would it be okay to keep in contact with you *if* I have any additional questions as I continue to explore this specific healthcare role—potentially as my future *lifetime* calling of public service?

11. What are some tips to ensure I have a successful informational interview overall?

- Be on time, whether it is a phone call, Zoom, or in person. Confirm also if a zoom call that you are in the same time zone if it is a provider in another part of the region / country / world.
- Dress *minimally* business casual (or higher) if you are meeting via Zoom or in person.
- Guide the conversation with your questions but please stay flexible.
- Please keep the meeting to the agreed-upon time and/or typically 20–30 minutes.
- Ask if they know others you can connect with—and whether you can use their name as a referral when reaching out.

- If the conversation goes well, ask if they might allow you to observe / shadow.
- *Always* follow up with a thank-you email within 1–2 days.

12. What should I do after my informational interview or observation / shadowing experience concludes?

- **Say thank you:** Always send a thank-you email *or mail them a thank you card* within 1-2 days. If you have had a positive experience with a healthcare professional, please ask them if you may keep in touch.
- **Reflect in writing/weekly journal:** What did you observe and learn overall?
- **Keep records:** Track names, dates, hours, and key takeaways in a journal or spreadsheet.
- **Stay connected:** Some professionals may become future mentors or help you build your network. The professional you spoke with is now part of your network. Consider asking if they have any colleagues, they might refer you to visit with—and whether you may mention their name when you reach out to professionally introduce yourself.

Note: All of this documentation will come in handy later when you apply to professional school(s).