Experiential Learning

“Experiential Learning”—learning by experience—an essential part of pre-health studies at UT Dallas.

Develop your competencies through volunteering, observation, and/or work with patients and healthcare providers, and through research.

Volunteering

Shadowing

Work

Research

“How available are volunteering, shadowing, and work at UT Dallas?”

Extremely available.

You can volunteer on-campus through Pre-Health Student Groups and through Comet Cupboard, First Year Leaders, Freshman Mentors, Transfer Mentors, and the Office of Student Volunteerism.

There are also hundreds of off-campus locations.

Focus your volunteer applications by asking, “Are there...

• ...healthcare tasks I want to learn?”

• ...public health problems I want to address?”
• …types of patients I want to become better at helping?

**Volunteering**

Volunteering is an easy way to help patients and providers. Most UT Dallas students apply to volunteer in multiple settings.

There are hundreds of potential venues. Just within a 10-minute drive of UT Dallas you’ll find:

- 6 hospitals  
- 16 hospices  
- 12 free clinics  
- 11 long-term care/dementia care facilities  
- 6 humanitarian shelters  
- Dozens of churches, mosques, and synagogues engaged in community outreach and missions.

Some students also volunteer abroad through groups like Global Brigades and International Service Learning.

**Shadowing**

HPAC strongly recommends Virtual Shadowing to all pre-health students as a free, easy way to gain a broad perspective on the lives of health professionals.

- UT Southwestern [VirtualShadowing.org](https://virtualshadowing.org)  
- [Hearts for Health Virtual Shadowing](https://heartsforhealth.org/virtual-shadowing)

After learning about many health professions, you may want to ask specific local professionals to volunteer or shadow them in person.

When you reach out to them politely by letter or e-mail include:

- Why you want to learn about that person specifically, or their practice.  
- How many hours per week or month you’re open to committing, and for how many weeks or months.  
- Whether you’ve read [HIPAA](https://healthit.hhs.gov/hipec/hipaa) and understand patient privacy rules.  
- Any special skills or experiences that you hope to contribute to the practice, or that will help you care for their patients.

If you don’t hear back within a couple weeks, follow up by phone or in person. Be especially polite to all office staff.

Some professionals never take volunteers or observers, but may still be open to talking about their work, schooling, and what they wish they’d done differently when they were your age.

Organizations like Atlantis offer shadowing outside the U.S.

**Work**

Healthcare jobs involve training and a regular work schedule, but come with a paycheck. Apply for them through job forums or the [Career Center](https://careercenter.utdallas.edu).

Some jobs require a certification, either before starting or within your first year of work. Certification tests are mostly online; you can self-prep for them or take a prep course. Some certifications (like EMT) require that you complete a licensed course.
Healthcare jobs commonly held by pre-health students include:

- Medical Scribe
- Nurse Assistant
- Medical Assistant
- Research Assistant
- Medical Technician
- Pharmacy Technician
- Registered Dental Assistant
- Emergency Medical Services ← on-campus EMT Certification is available through UEMR

**Research**

Many pre-health students engage in on-campus research, apply for Dallas-area research jobs, or apply for research-based enrichment programs. Consider research if you are fascinated by cutting edge science, can be meticulous and reliable, and want to build pre-health competencies including reliability, teamwork, cultural competency, quantitative reasoning, adaptability, and science literacy.

To join on-campus research, HPAC recommends that you:

1. Consider, *“What areas of science am I most interested in?”*
2. Use Coursebook to look up who’s teaching classes in those areas. Click on each class and “Instructor CV” to view the instructor’s background and publications.
3. Use the UT Dallas Library and Google Scholar to read the publications.
4. Still interested? Visit the professor during office hours to discuss their current work and what you hope to contribute.
5. Oh, they’re not looking for help at this time? Ask, *“Who else can I contact in this field?”*

*“Should I volunteer a few hours in many settings, or many hours in one?”*

HPAC recommends 3 Steps:

1. Seek broad experiences, starting with virtual shadowing and volunteering…
2. …to identify roles you’d like to become very good at and contribute to long-term…
3. …then pursue focused commitment to those roles.

Why? A person begins any new endeavor as a learner. Eventually—for most tasks, after 400-500 hours of practice—they become a fully trained and reliable achiever. Their rate of learning slows, but they start contributing, are relied upon by coworkers, and help the team progress. Achievers have the potential to accomplish significant things—and to earn strong letters of recommendation—that mere learners do not.