

Syracuse University

College of Arts & Sciences

Advising and Career Services

Preparing to be a Competitive Applicant

How do I Prepare for a Health-Related Career?

Students interested in entering the health professions seek a competitive edge. We find undergraduate students attain this goal by being informed about their field of interest, the requirements of the related professional school, and the foundational curriculum that is recommended for their chosen path. Self-direction and proactive academic planning are essential components to the preparation process. Prehealth students should be especially mindful of the importance of earning GPAs and entrance exam scores that will enable them to become viable candidates to their schools of choice.

The Application Process

Professional schools seek candidates with academic and experiential breadth and depth and who exemplify certain characteristics that will define them in the field. The health professions demand a mastery of the sciences, an ability to analyze and synthesize information, excellent communications skills, a keen intellect, strong work ethic, commitment to public service, and social-emotional maturity. In addition to academic achievement, holistic development is vital.

Academics

GPA/Coursework

Academic criteria, along with test scores, are one of the first things that schools will evaluate. While a “C” or better is required in all prerequisite coursework, both an overall GPA and a science GPA are major factors in the admissions process. Transcripts from all schools attended are weighed, as are all attempts. Taking foundational courses elsewhere, in the summer, and/or repeating a course may or may not be in the student’s best interest. Seek the advisement of a health professions advisor in these decisions.

Admission Tests

Students should take the appropriate entrance exam when prepared. Several of the tests assess knowledge acquired through prerequisite coursework. It is important to understand the content and develop an effective study plan well in advance. A common recommendation is to start preparing in excess of six months before the test. Discuss the optimal timing of an entrance exam with a health professions advisor.

Other Academic Considerations

Summer programs, studying abroad, and post-baccalaureate programs may also enhance the academic experience and credentials of candidates. Students should explore these options early and plan in advance.

Clinical Experience

In the clinical experiences that a student should pursue, both active and passive participation can be beneficial. In clinical settings, consider the quality of the experience and the impact on personal growth and understanding of the profession. Summer and winter breaks are good times to pursue such opportunities. To the extent possible, students should remain engaged in clinical experience throughout the year in the form of internships, volunteer or paid positions, or shadowing professionals in a variety of settings.

Research

While research is not a requirement of every health profession, it is critical to some and is always considered a useful skill to acquire. Opportunities to participate directly in research can be found in academic departments, hospitals and medical schools, or structured summer programs. Networking with faculty or professionals in the field opens many doors to research exposure.

Leadership

Health care professionals work as both team members and leaders. Schools look for applicants with demonstrated skills that would allow them to work well in both roles. Team skills are acquired and demonstrated through group projects and shadowing. Leadership skills are acquired and demonstrated through internship, community service projects, and other co-curricular activities that help students hone their decision-making skills and take the initiative to successfully complete projects and activities.

Community and Public Service

A desire to help people is commonly expressed by students articulating an interest in the health professions. Among others, this altruistic tendency is a valued personal trait. In order to best demonstrate philanthropic interest, students should be engaged in community or public service activities of importance to them.

Letters of Recommendation

Aside from academic credentials and a wealth of extracurricular experience, admissions committees strongly weigh letters of recommendation and personal statements as valuable tools for gaining insight into the person beyond the credentials. Generally, the following guidelines exist for most professional schools:

- *Academic recommendations*—at least two from science faculty and one from faculty within your major
- *Other recommendations*—internships, research, employment and long-term clinical commitments
- *Not accepted*—family, clergy, friends (consider only if based on significant professional experience)
- *Medical/Dental applicants*: Health Professions Advising provides a committee letter to eligible students

The Personal Statement

The personal statement is a chance to express self-awareness and conviction in choosing a health profession. Students highlight accomplishments in relation to personal growth and interest in the field. The statement provides vision into a student's character, unique qualities, or a distinctive background not evident on the application. A student may consider explaining inconsistencies in an application, such as disparate grades, test scores, a poor semester, or other factors that may be a cause for concern.

When is the best time to apply?

There is no absolute “right” time to apply. Students should be ready to begin a rigorous and demanding course of study, be fully informed about their career choice, and be well prepared applicants. Students often develop further knowledge and skills through post-baccalaureate programs, clinical or work experience.

Is there a “right” major for the health professions?

Sometimes there is a correlation between specific major requirements and professional prerequisites which may factor into the selection of a major. However, the academic major is not a determining factor in the admission process, so students should choose a major based on their strengths and interests. The best major for a health professions student is a major that inspires intellectual curiosity and elicits passion.