

YOU AND YOUR HEALTH PROFESSIONS ADVISOR: AN IMPORTANT PARTNERSHIP

**Reasons why students interested in a health care career should consult
a health professions advisor**

Despite the availability of health professions advisors, some students don't take advantage of all they offer. Advisors are your advocates, who can help you:

- make an informed choice of a career
- evaluate your strengths
- identify gaps in your preparation
- gain access to more information
- connect with community resources—health care professionals and institutions

and

- make your application as good as it can be

Remember:

First steps are important.

It's never too late to talk with a health professions advisor.

Health professions advisors can help you answer many questions: the simple, basic ones, and those that are more complex. All of these questions revolve around these related issues:

- **What draws me to the career in health care I am considering?**
- **Am I making an informed career choice?**
- **Do I have the intellectual capacity to be a *really* good health care professional?**
- **How can I make my application as strong as possible?**

Here are common questions students ask. You may recognize some of your own.

There are questions about career.

- Is the career I am considering the best choice for me? Do I have the intellectual capacity to be successful in professional school and the career that follows?
- Have I narrowed my career choices too soon?
- I want to be sure I know what it's *really* like to be a physician (dentist, veterinarian, nurse, therapist, etc.) so that I am not idealizing it. What's the career *really* like? What are its stresses—and joys?
- How do health care professionals:
 - handle the responsibilities and the “malpractice threat”?
 - find the right measure of involvement with patients?
- What are the various opportunities within the career? Can one combine practice, research and teaching into one career?
- What's the answer to the conflicting pictures of a career in health care: one that is stimulating and satisfying versus one that is constricted by outside regulation? How much freedom do health care professionals actually have? How much do HMOs, insurance companies and the government interfere with day-to-day decisions?
- Can I actually build a career that has balance—science and the humanities, family and practice? Will there be time for other interests, such as music?
- How do I make time for family? How do I have a personal life outside of my career?
- Is a career in health care really worth all the time and sacrifice?
- If I am having trouble with sciences and math, what other careers can I consider to fulfill my wish to serve and help people?

There are questions about preparation.

- What do I need to focus on as I prepare for a career in health care?
- Do I have the intellectual capacity to do the work in professional school and the career that follows?
- What major should I pick? Biology? Chemistry? History? Music?
- What are some volunteer opportunities?
- What are the best ways to use my summers?

There are questions about the admissions process.

- How do professional schools select candidates for admission?
- How can I make myself as strong a candidate as possible?
- What are my chances of getting in?
- How important is my GPA? How important are the entrance exams like the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), the GRE (Graduate Record Exam), and others? Will my C in introductory chemistry get in the way?
- I'm having difficulty writing a personal statement for the application. Can you help?
- How do I prepare myself for interviews?
- How many schools should I apply to?
- How do I go about deciding which schools to apply to?
- What schools pay special attention to community health (alternative or complementary care, research, etc.)?
- How am I going to pay for my education?

There are questions about the training for the career.

- What's professional school and post-graduate training really like?
- Can I have a personal life as a student and resident?
- When is the best time to think about starting a family?

And if your weren't accepted on the first try, there are other questions.

- Why wasn't I accepted? Was it my grades? My scores? Something else?
- What can (should) I do next year?
- How can I add to my preparation, improve the quality of my application, and enhance my future chances of acceptance?
- Should I re-evaluate whether I have made the right career choice?

And yet...

...some students don't ever consult health professions advisors, or consult them only late in the course of their career considerations.

Why not? The answers fall into four broad categories.

Some are simply unaware of what their advisors can offer. There are variations on this theme.

- Some students don't know what questions to ask.
- Some students trust their peers for accurate information.
- Some say, "I don't need advice from a real person, because I have access to the web."
- Some think they already know what they need because "my uncle (aunt, mother, father) is in the profession and has given me all the advice I need."

- Some think that applying is “no big deal.” Only later do they realize that they need help.
- Some already have what they think is all the information they need because they are bright, motivated, and self-reliant.

Some stay away because they’re embarrassed.

- Some are not excited about announcing that they’re interested, for fear of failure.
- Some are concerned that they are not competitive because of “...that C in intro biology” or “I didn’t do volunteer work.”

These students pass up the opportunity to learn about resources that could help them solve whatever is holding them back. Health professions advisors help identify gaps and suggest remedies. Advisors are not gatekeepers; they are your advocates.

Some decide to become a health care professional late in the course of their undergraduate studies or even after graduation.

Whenever you consider your decision, the advisor can help. Even if it’s after graduation, the health professions advisors at most colleges and universities are still available to you. And, if not, you can consult the website of the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions (NAAHP.org: click on “Finding an Advisor”) for advisors elsewhere who offer their services.

Some students, who would make really good health care professionals, don’t even consider these careers, because of invalid perceptions about them. Some of these “myths” are:

- You can’t take time with patients. You have eight (or five) minutes to see them.
- You can’t practice based on your personal and professional values, because the HMO’s, the insurance companies and the government always intrude on your practice.
- You can’t have a personal life as a health care professional.
- You have to be a genius to be a health care professional.

The facts are that really good health care professionals always have their patients’ interests at heart as they make decisions, take all the time they need, don’t compromise their values, and have balanced personal and professional lives with diverse interests. And while you need to be bright, intellectually curious and a creative, critical thinker to be a health care professional, you don’t have to be a genius.

For all of these students, a health professions advisor can help. Better than the web or an exchange of emails, an engaged, in-depth conversation with an advisor can provide new information and insights, validate (or invalidate) prior information and conclusions, and identify gaps in your knowledge. Like any good, thorough health professional, a pre-health professions student should never be reluctant to get a second opinion.

When you work with your health professions advisor, you'll get help with...

...validating your choice of career and your ability to do the work. Your advisor will tell you that...

- unless you know what the experience of being a patient and a health care professional is really like, then you are making an uninformed choice. One gains this knowledge from all of these experiences:
 - personal or family encounters with illness
 - paid or volunteer activity in serving others in a health care setting
 - reflecting on what you learned from the experience and what the experience meant to you
- the “intellectual capacity to do the work of a health care professional” does not require genius, but rather a creative and open mind and the ability to look at complex and difficult problems in new and creative ways.
- the ability to look at an issue in depth is an important consideration for admission, often illustrated by undergraduate work in some concentrated area.
- a non-science major is not a disadvantage in the application process. The rate of admission for non-science majors is similar to that of science majors.
- a career in health care requires a commitment to life-long learning—from teachers and colleagues; from texts, journals and continuing education courses; and from patients.

...advice about the application process. Your advisor will tell you that...

- the best time to apply is when your application is the strongest. If there are major gaps in your preparation, you should consider applying when those gaps are filled. Your advisor can help you identify those gaps.
- it's not all about grades and test scores. Professional school admissions committees look beyond grades. Otherwise they could fill their classes with students with perfect grade point averages and scores.
- a career as a health care professional requires more than technical skill. Professional schools carefully look for human qualities in their candidates for admission. A career in health care is built on relationships: between caregivers and patients, and within and across professions.

- professional schools are looking for human qualities—service to individuals and to the community, for example, and some sort of leadership role. A good predictor of future altruism is past altruism.
- professional schools want their applicants to have a sampling of the professional experience, so that they are familiar with the career. Your advisor can help you make those connections.
- professional schools look for excellence in any major, not simply a scientific one.
- Professional schools look for scholarship beyond the classroom—research, for instance, in any subject, not necessarily a scientific one.
- the most important first question is not, “How do I get in?” but rather, “What’s the right career for me?” That means making an informed choice.
- “*You* are your resume.” The task of the resume is to tell the reader who you *really* are, and that goes beyond a recounting of what you have done. Professional schools look for evidence of depth and reflection. One of the best ways to demonstrate those qualities is to reflect on what you have learned from each of your important experiences. Beyond your grades, your scores and your activities, professional schools want to know what sort of person you are.

...choosing where to apply. Your advisor will suggest that you consider:

- What sort of place do I want to be in for the next four years—urban or rural setting, big city or small?
- Is it important for me to be near people who are my “support system”—family and friends?
- If I have a strong ethnic identity, is there a community for me at the school and in the city?
- What’s the “culture” of the professional school? Are the faculty and my peers committed to my success? Does the medical school recognize the importance of the human side of the profession? Of community service? Of other special interests of mine?
- What about financial considerations? Is there a state institution that provides financial benefits to its resident students? Are there generous scholarship and loan opportunities?

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Information about health professions advising at Vanderbilt University can be found in the “GREENBOOK”, or in the HPAO.

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