

Part of showing your commitment to your chosen career is observing professionals in your field—also known as job shadowing. Observation hours allow you to explore a career and to spend time networking with professionals currently working in that field. During your observation hours, you can learn about a job by walking through the daily work with a professional.

This experience is a temporary, unpaid exposure to the workplace under the supervision of a licensed professional in that field. You can witness the work environment, occupational skills in practice, the value of professional training, and potential career options. Job observing/shadowing is limited, however, in that you are allowed to observe only. Direct work experience, responsibility and skills are not acquired.

Observation hours are an important element of your application to a professional program. These hours help you solidify your commitment to your potential career and to understand what a person in that field does on a daily basis. Observing can also help you identify exactly what it is that draws you to that profession—something your future professional program will expect of you.

Learning Objectives for Observation Hours

- Determine your fit for the profession including aptitude, dedication, and attributes needed to pursue and practice in that field.
- Enhance your knowledge of the interaction between the patient/client and the professional and how this relationship impacts the care and services that are provided.
- Better understand the roles of other members of the service delivery team.
- Experience the environment(s) in which professionals work.
- Develop an understanding of the necessary communication skills and professionalism to work in the field.
- Observe the variations in daily organization of work schedules.

Additional Reasons for Observing

- Professional schools factor observation/shadowing experiences into their decisions about whom to admit. Observation time can indicate a more realistic understanding of the daily variations of professional work and what life is really like as a working professional.
- Students must have experience in a related environment to make an informed decision about a particular career field.
- Experiencing a professional environment is essential to preparing for professional school. If your application shows little or no direct exposure to the field in which you are hoping to work, you will not convince an admissions committee that you have a passion for and deep knowledge of your chosen field.
- It is a good idea to shadow a few professionals in your chosen field. All experiences will not be the same.
- A commitment to the field is very important to admissions committees. You will spend a number of years preparing for your chosen field and need to be unwavering in your efforts to succeed.
- **Shadowing is more than “following someone around,” and instead provides an opportunity to begin active learning in a real situation. Much of your education in professional school will be built upon observation. You will need to learn to be a skilled observer.**

Observation Hours for International Students

As an international student, you need to limit your time observing in any one setting to no more than 40 hours. This will help you avoid any problems with immigration status and prevent abuse of your time by professionals you are observing. If you feel you need to extend your time in a particular setting, you should discuss it with the Office of International Students and Scholars before doing so.

Tips for Creating Observation Opportunities

It can be difficult to find opportunities to observe professionals, but there are a few approaches you might find helpful.

- Start by thinking about your family, family friends, and parents of your friends and consider who you already know with a connection to the field. Ask them first. If they have a connection to you, they are more likely to agree to your request.
- Talk to your relatives/family friends about asking their friends who have a connection to your field of interest.
- Send a letter of introduction to a professional's office introducing yourself, your interests, and your preparation for that field. Send a résumé. Later follow up with a phone call requesting observation hours. Do not use the term "internship" as this may mean something entirely different to them.
- Ask people in person when possible. It is much more difficult to say "no" directly to you.
- If your efforts are not working, ask to interview the professional about their career. After they have had a good conversation with you and you have presented yourself professionally, then ask if you can observe them.
- Don't be deterred if the first few people turn you down—keep finding others to ask.
- If you do observe someone, ask them for a referral to someone else they know that you can contact to continue observing. Ask specifically if you can state that they referred you.

Before Observing

- Ask the professional or their staff about what to expect, any ground rules, duration of the day, any special attire, etc.
- Be professional! Not only are you representing yourself, but you are representing the office of that professional and in some ways you are representing Purdue University.

Observation Etiquette

- Patients/clients, staff, and those you are directly observing deserve the utmost respect. While observing you need to present yourself as the future professional you will be.
- Be appropriately dressed for the environment you will be in. If you are not sure what to wear, discuss it with the office. Consider slacks, shirt, and tie and closed-toe/heel dress shoes or a conservative skirt and blouse or even a suit. If you are unsure of what to wear.
- You may be on your feet a lot during the day. Wear comfortable shoes. Generally something that is closed toe and heel is best.
- Have impeccable hygiene.
- Be on time and respectful of everyone you meet. Accurately represent your position and role—you are not a trained provider. Respect people's rights to refuse your presence.
- Turn off your phone—or better yet, do not have it with you. No pictures—ever.
- Do not ask questions of the professional in front of the patient/client.
- Bring a notebook to take notes. Write down questions for areas you do not understand. If there is time after your observational experience, ask questions about what you saw. Take notes during your day when you are away from clients/patients. Take special care to avoid identifying information about the patients/clients and then spend time thinking about what you have learned during your observations.
- If you are required to fill out paperwork, provide proof of immunization, or take part in some kind of training (such as HIPAA training in healthcare settings—the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), be sure your materials are complete.

After Observing

- Follow up. You were a guest that day. Thank the professional and their staff for their time by mail or email.
- Keep all notes from experiences in one place. In your application and/or in an interview, you will have opportunities to share reflections on your experiences.
- Reflect on your time observing and ask yourself questions:
 - From this experience, is the field what I thought it would be? If not, how did it differ?
 - What have I learned about being a professional in this field?
 - What have I learned about creating a relationship with a patient/client? Do I feel I am taking steps to build the necessary communication skills?

Sample Questions to Ask Professionals

- On a typical day, what do you do? How do you organize your day?
- What percentage of your time is spent doing various activities?
- How do you balance work and family responsibilities?
- What personal attributes or characteristics are important to being successful in this field?
- If you could do it all over again, would you enter the same field?
- How do you see this field changing in the future?
- What do you look for in a colleague?
- From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
- Will the demand for this field be changing in the future? Why or why not?
- What advice would you give someone hoping to enter this field?
- What courses do you wish you would have taken as an undergraduate student?
- How did your undergraduate years prepare you for this field?
- Why did you ask the patient/client that question?

Remember: This experience is about observing a professional, **not** taking part in the action. If you feel you are not learning enough from the experience, you need to train yourself to focus more on the subtleties of the client/patient and provider interactions.

In medical settings, if options to provide hands-on treatment are offered to you, you need to politely decline by stating that while you appreciate the opportunity, you are there only to observe and are not appropriately trained to provide medical services.

Notes: Keep track of the hours you have observed in each setting. Some professional programs will ask you to list this on your application. They will also ask for a phone number for the office and a contact person.