

Importance of Clinical Experience

What is it? Any experience that involves the care and treatment of patients and ideally one in which you can observe the patient/doctor relationship.

Why? Medical schools want to be confident that you:

- have a good understanding of the realities of medicine
- are service-minded and people-oriented
- are committed to the practice of medicine

Factors Schools will evaluate the experience based on:

- length/time of commitment (some schools expect a minimum of one year)
- depth of experience
- lessons learned from the experience; reflections

Ways to obtain clinical experience

Volunteer at community clinics, nursing homes, hospitals, or other medical facilities

- Allows you to observe a variety of health care professionals
- Gain knowledge of how a hospital or clinic is run
- Potential drawback: Some locations may not provide patient contact; it is important to evaluate the experience and see what you are gaining from it.

Supplemental Experience

Shadow physicians

- Allows you to observe the daily life of a doctor and gain insight from professionals about the field
- May not be possible to shadow for extended periods of time
- Resources:
 - Northwestern University Clinical Apprentice Program (NU-CAP): <https://bit.ly/HPANM>
 - NEXT (Northwestern Externship Program): <https://mentor.northwestern.edu/programs/next>
 - Northwestern Network Mentorship Program: <https://mentor.northwestern.edu>
 - Personal Network (friends/family/your own physicians)

Other possible ways to obtain experience:

- Talk with your advisor about virtual volunteering (e.g. crisis/emotional support text hotlines) and informational interviewing if in-person clinical experience is not available.
- Gain experience as an emergency medical technician (EMT); may be difficult to volunteer as an EMT in Illinois. We do not recommend taking EMT classes without planning to serve as an EMT.
- Northwestern University Chicago Field Studies and Engage Chicago programs

Volunteering in a non-healthcare setting

Volunteering in any community service setting (food pantries, mutual aid societies, etc.) can demonstrate personal qualities that are valued in the health professions, including:

- Commitment to service
- Willingness to give one's time and energy
- Capacity to work with and relate to people from different backgrounds
- Ability to balance academics with outside interests

Volunteering in non-healthcare settings can also help you explore other interests and shows health professions programs that you can balance a variety of activities.

Sample of Chicago-area clinical volunteer sites:

- Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago
- Community Health Clinic
- New Life Volunteering Society
- Shirley Ryan AbilityLab
- Ascension St. Francis Hospital
- The Pearl (formerly Symphony) of Evanston
- University of Illinois Hospital
- Advocate Illinois Masonic
- Northwestern Memorial Hospital
- La Rabida Children's Hospital
- Heartland Health Centers
- Weiss Memorial Hospital
- Rainbow Hospice
- Lawndale Christian Health Center
- Local Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- Almost Home Kids
- Rush Medical Center
- University of Chicago Hospitals

Additional ways to find volunteer opportunities:

Northwestern Student Organizations & Activities <https://www.northwestern.edu/studentorgs/>

Wildcat Connection <https://northwestern.campuslabs.com/engage/>

Volunteer Match <https://www.volunteermatch.org/>

More opportunities are available on our website in the [Experiences section](#).

Additional opportunities may also be found in our weekly Events & Opportunities newsletter. Remember that clinical experiences do not have to take place at Northwestern or in Chicago to be valued -- you can find additional experiences elsewhere, too!

Talk with your advisor for more insight about how and when to incorporate clinical experiences into your timeline. Also, please share with your health professions advisor if you have a great experience volunteering in a clinic, hospital or other community service setting.