Allied Health

The Culture of the Health Care Industry

The mission of an allied health care professional is to support and complete the work of physicians and other specialists. There are many, many different occupations in the allied health field. This handout focuses on a few of the allied health fields that require higher education. Examples of these professions include nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, pharmacy, and physician assistance.

The health care industry is one of the most diverse in its employment of people from varying socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and lifestyles. While “culture” is largely determined by where you end up working, several characteristics common to the whole industry, include:

**Humanitarianism**
The desire to help others motivates many health care professionals. People employed in health care tend to be personable, outgoing individuals who value person-to-person communication as a means of building working relationships within a facility.

**High Status**
Many of the positions associated with health care offer the opportunity to save lives, affect the course of a deadly disease, or provide support services like education. Many professionals endure years of training, and all dedicate themselves to years of hard work. The respect associated with contributing to a healthier society is something other industries can’t offer.

**Fast Pace**
Time is money, particularly in the health care industry. Keeping costs under control often means that professionals split their time between facilities, departments pool resources and share equipment, and close attention is paid to every dollar spent.

**Unpredictable Workday**
For providers, the job requirements change with each patient. In this fluctuating industry, flexibility is a necessity. Although health care professionals must stay organized and prepared, days rarely fall according to their plans.

**Cooperation**
The health care industry relies on networks of talented people who communicate and work together. Teamwork is essential not only within a department, but also within and between organizations.
## Examples of Professions in Allied Health

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<td>Nurse Practitioner (NP)</td>
<td>Nurse practitioners are registered nurses with advanced education that prepares them to take on management positions within the field. Nurse practitioners are also qualified to provide basic primary care. An NP, working under the supervision of a physician, can do much of what the physician does. Some NPs with advanced training can prescribe medications and diagnose and treat common acute illnesses and injuries.</td>
<td>The NP program, a master of science degree, incorporates courses in pharmacology and clinical decision-making, which prepare NPs to prescribe certain medications and make tentative diagnoses. The minimum requirements are a bachelor’s degree with two to four years of clinical experience. For more information: American Academy of Nurse Practitioners <a href="http://www.aanp.org">www.aanp.org</a></td>
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<td>Registered Nurse (RN)</td>
<td>There is always a need for registered nurses (RNs), and employment is expected to grow faster than average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nursing is already the largest health care occupation there is. Nurses provide direct patient care; observe, assess, and record symptoms; administer medications; and assist physicians during treatment and examination. Nurses can specialize in emergency room, operating room, or pediatric nursing with on-the-job training.</td>
<td>To become an RN, you must graduate from a nursing program and pass a national licensing examination. The minimum educational requirements for nursing include a two-year associate degree in nursing (ADN) and completion of a national licensing exam, but if possible, it is better to attend a RN program at a 4-year college or university and earn a BSN. RNs interested in research, management, teaching, or clinical specialization must complete a master’s degree in nursing. For more information: American Nurses Association <a href="http://www.nursingworld.org">www.nursingworld.org</a></td>
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<td>Audiologist and Speech Language Pathologist</td>
<td>Audiologists determine if a person has a hearing loss, and what type of loss it is. If a person can benefit from using hearing aids or other assistive listening systems, the audiologist can assist with the selection, fitting, and training in their effective use. Speech Language Pathologists evaluate speech, language, cognitive communication, and swallowing skills of adults and children; and then determine what problems exist and the best treatment.</td>
<td>A degree in communication sciences and disorders is required, which may be acquired on the undergraduate and/or graduate level. A strong background in the liberal arts is also beneficial. For more information: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association <a href="http://www.asha.org">www.asha.org</a></td>
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<td>Registered Dietician</td>
<td>Dietitians and nutritionists plan food and nutrition programs, and supervise the preparation and serving of meals. They help prevent and treat illnesses by promoting healthy eating habits and suggesting diet modifications. Dietitians run food service systems for institutions such as hospitals and schools, promote sound eating habits through education, and conduct research. Major areas of practice include clinical, community, management, and consultant dietetics.</td>
<td>To become a RD, you must complete (at minimum) an undergraduate degree in dietetics, foods and nutrition, or a related field or a 2-year post-baccalaureate in dietetics, foods and nutrition, or a related field. Those who go on to earn a MS or PhD in dietetics or a related field most often teach, conduct research, or work as administrators or consultants. For more information: American Dietetic Association <a href="http://www.eatright.org">www.eatright.org</a></td>
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<td>Physical Therapist (PT)</td>
<td>Physical therapists most often work with patients who are recovering from an accident, injury, or ailment (such as a stroke) or have a disability, which affects their strength or mobility. PTs practice in hospitals, clinics, and private offices, and consult with other health care professionals, including physicians, nurses, educators, and social workers. Some PTs specialize in areas such as sports physical therapy, pediatrics, neurology, or geriatrics.</td>
<td>Physical therapists in every state must graduate from an accredited physical therapist educational program and be licensed before they can practice. Degrees in physical therapy are offered on the doctoral level. For more information: American Physical Therapy Association <a href="http://www.apta.org">www.apta.org</a></td>
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<td>Occupational Therapist (OT)</td>
<td>Occupational therapists work with people of all ages who have suffered from some type of injury, illness, or other impairment that hinders them from conducting basic work or life tasks. Occupational therapists provide exercises and sometimes orthotic devices to help these patients improve their life and work functioning. Some OTs specialize in areas such as pediatrics, neurology, Burns, or geriatrics.</td>
<td>Occupational therapists undergo a training program similar to the one physical therapists complete. In order to sit for the national certification exam administered by the American Occupational Therapy Certification Board, a person must have a master’s or doctoral degree in occupational therapy. For more information: American Occupational Therapy Association <a href="http://www.aota.org">www.aota.org</a></td>
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<td>Pharmacist</td>
<td>Pharmacists dispense drugs prescribed by physicians and other health practitioners and provide information to patients about medications and their use. They advise physicians and other health practitioners on the selection, dosages, interactions, and side effects of medications. Pharmacists must understand the use; clinical effects; and composition of drugs, including their chemical, biological, and physical properties. Most pharmacists work either in a community setting, such as a retail drug store, or in a hospital or clinic. Pharmacists in community or retail pharmacies counsel patients and answer questions about prescription drugs. They also provide information about over-the-counter drugs.</td>
<td>A Pharm-D (doctorate of pharmacy) requires at least 2-years of specific pre-professional (undergraduate) coursework followed by 4-academic years of professional study. Most students apply to Pharm-D programs after their sophomore or junior year in college. Some programs may allow graduates of four year colleges and universities to transfer into the Pharm-D program, which would most likely entail 2-3 years of coursework in pharmacy. For more information: American Pharmacists Association <a href="http://www.pharmacist.com">www.pharmacist.com</a></td>
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<td>Physician Assistant (PA)</td>
<td>A PA always works under a physician’s supervision, though in understaffed facilities where a primary care physician may not be available every day, a PA might handle all the patient care. More often, a PA will interview patients to record their medical histories, give basic physicals, interpret lab results, and make tentative diagnoses to confirm later with a physician. Many PAs also follow up with patients to monitor their reaction to drugs, teach them about nutrition, and consult with their family members. PAs may also specialize in certain areas, such as surgery. In some states, physician’s assistants can prescribe medicines from certain classes of drugs.</td>
<td>Physician assistant is a master’s degree program. For most programs, prerequisite requirements are: bachelor degree including two semesters of biology with labs, two semesters of general chemistry with labs, organic chemistry with lab, bio-statistics, and biochemistry; and 1000 hours of health care experience. For more information and listing of accredited programs: American Academy of Physician Assistants <a href="http://www.aapa.org">www.aapa.org</a></td>
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What You Need to Do Now!

Exploration
Confused about whether or not health care is right for you? The best way to find out if you are a good fit for the industry is by talking to and observing professionals at work. You might start out by conducting informational interviews and then progress to job shadowing (observing the professional at work) when you are more certain about your interests. Join the WFU Career Connectors group on LinkedIn.com to find Wake Forest alums in the health care field.

Professors
Talk to your professors, especially those in health care-related disciplines. Biology, chemistry, HES, and psychology professors might pass along the names of researchers or specialists with whom you can speak. Most importantly, your professors will draft the written recommendations that attest to or refute your ability to make it after college. Show them you are the intelligent, responsible, enthusiastic initiator you want the health care world to see.

Academics
While knowledge of biology, chemistry, and life sciences may be essential to a career in medical research or patient care, some health care professions do not require a hard science undergraduate degree. Select courses that interest you and that you can excel in. Remember that most students excel in courses they enjoy, so being miserable in the "right" courses may even damage your college record.

Extracurriculars
Whatever activity you decide to pursue, think about how it relates to your post-college interests. Participation in sports shows that you’re a team player. Travel or independent study demonstrates initiative. Designing a human service program signals philanthropy. Leading any club attests to your communication and management skills, attributes that greatly appeal to health care employers.

Internship
There is no better way to prove your interest in health care than to secure an internship in the field during college. Assess your interests though, and you may find that the right internship for you is at the college athletic training office, a local private practice, student health, or the county department of health. Once you start an internship, build relationships within the office or facility and keep a journal for reflections, anecdotes, and work ideas to refer to later.

Volunteer
Opportunities for volunteering in health care are so abundant that organizations need to hire full-time workers to coordinate all the volunteers. Volunteering is a good way to break into the business for two reasons. First, it expands your knowledge of certain aspects of the field. Second, it gives you cooperative contact with health care professionals. Performing volunteer duties well can impress the right people, but keep in mind the flipside of this advice and never volunteer unless you have the time and focus to do a great job.

Further Education
Evaluate if further education is necessary to pursue your career interest and research which schools offer programs in that field.

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Additional Allied Health Resources

- For more information on Allied Health Professions: [www.explorehealthcareers.org](http://www.explorehealthcareers.org)
- To learn more about being a volunteer at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center: [www.wakehealth.edu/volunteer](http://www.wakehealth.edu/volunteer)
- To research graduate programs for Allied Health Professions: [http://career.opcd.wfu.edu/explore-graduate-school/](http://career.opcd.wfu.edu/explore-graduate-school/)
- For more information and to contact the Pre-Med or Pre-Allied Health Advisers at Wake Forest: [http://advising.wfu.edu/pre_professional_advising.html](http://advising.wfu.edu/pre_professional_advising.html)