Aspiring Docs

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How Do I... Get Lab Experience?

Each year, the number of medical school applicants who have significant medical or lab experience grows. Many universities now require internships or a capstone course during the senior year of college. Working in a lab setting will help make you a competitive applicant and and will also help you to determine if a career in medicine or medical research is right for you.

Where do I start?

If you're currently enrolled in college, first check the science department bulletin boards or web sites for opportunities to assist with current faculty research projects. Also, express your interest to your academic advisor or your pre-health advisor.

Throughout the year, several professional organizations may host open houses or presentations on your campus. Be sure to attend and ask representatives about paid and volunteer opportunities. If you're specifically looking for a paid position, make an appointment with your school's career center. They will let you know about job openings, and they can also offer resume help and go over interview tips and techniques.

When is the best time to look for a position?

According to Rivka Glaser, PhD., Adjunct Professor of Biology at Stevenson University, if you're interested in a job for the following semester, the best time to look for positions is during the middle of the semester, or a week or two before midterms. There also tend to be a lot of research opportunities in the summer, both paid and volunteer. The career center or your pre-health advising office may have a list. Some opportunities may be external to the school; be sure to ask if a stipend is provided or if you will be responsible for any travel costs. Remember, typically there are more applicants than available spots. Get your *completed* applications in early.

What's the best way to apply?

Dr. Glaser suggests sending an email or dropping by the professor's office. Talk about the research or project you're interested in. Demonstrate your knowledge about the project, and also about any relevant techniques you learned in previous courses and labs. Even if you've never formally worked in a lab, chances are you've taken a course with a lab component. ***That counts as experience***. To prepare, go back through your notes and familiarize yourself with some of the experiments you've conducted. Be able to communicate your hypothesis, techniques, and findings.

Dr. Glaser stresses that professionalism is key. If you're going to approach one of your previous instructors for a job or a recommendation, make sure you made a good impression during the class. For instance, you're not likely to get a positive recommendation if you fell asleep in class, missed several sessions or were often texting. Teachers notice. Also, watch how you address professors when emailing or speaking to them. Don't speak in the same manner and tone that you use with your friends; be more formal. Use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation in any correspondence.

How should I prepare for an interview?

With any interview, it's important to make a good impression. Be sure to dress appropriately. Come prepared with a resume, or, if you have one, a portfolio. Often times during interviews, you'll be asked about your career goals. It's helpful to be able to speak about the steps you plan to take to meet those goals. Talk about classes you've taken, especially upper-level science courses. Speak about the skills and knowledge of techniques and equipment you've acquired through your coursework. Know what lab experiments you've done. If you've done any sort of research – even in your coursework – keep track of it. This shows you have experience. Lastly, interviewers often ask candidates if they have any questions. Dr. Glaser suggests asking what they think you'll learn and how this position might be able to improve your skill set.

What do I do after the interview?

A thank you goes a long way to making a good impression. A handwritten note or email should be sent later that day or the next day, thanking the interviewer for their time. Reiterate that you believe you are a good candidate for the position and are still very interested in the job. Again, be sure to use correct capitalization, spelling and grammar.

Lastly, it's a good idea to speak to people who have worked in the lab or participated in the program previously. You'll be able to gauge their impressions about the work, the environment and other aspects of the position from a student perspective.

This is great advice, but what if I'm not in college?

If you haven't started college or if you've already graduated, focus on networking. Don't be afraid to call people you know or a friend's parent to ask if they know of any open positions or research being done. Human resource departments at large research hospitals and universities in your area might be looking for lab technicians. Job opportunities are typically posted on the career pages of their web sites.