Learning About Optometry

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Before applying to optometry school, you should learn as much as you can about the clinical practice of the profession. Well over 90% of optometrists are in practice, with a relatively small percent serving as researchers, educators, or in ophthalmic industry.

You should observe optometrists in practice in a variety of settings. The most common are:

- **Private Practices** – (primary care) The more practices you visit, the more acquainted with optometry you will become. If you think you would like to practice in a medium or small sized community, you should try and visit a practice in such a community. (Suburban practices in Birmingham are not the same thing.) The best place to start is with your own optometrist who knows your family.

- **Institutions** – (primary and secondary care) The UAB School of Optometry will arrange visits by undergraduate students to our facilities. You may observe patient care in our clinics, talk with students enrolled in our program, and discuss admissions requirements with a member of the admissions office. To schedule a visit to the Teaching Clinic, call Ms. Willie White, at (205) 934-4748.

- **Referral Centers** – (secondary care) These are surgical centers in which optometrists and ophthalmologists work together to provide surgical care, typically cataract, retinal and corneal surgery. They offer a look at how secondary care is provided and how physicians and optometrist work cooperatively. An example of such a center is Omega Eyecare, in Birmingham; the center director is Dr. Jim Marbourg.

To get the most out of your visit, you should be prepared to ask questions about anything that you feel is important to you, but areas of importance for discussion include:

- **Lifestyle Issues** - this is a major reason that people are attracted to optometry; if having time of personal interests or family is important to you, you should discuss this during your visit.

- **Clinical Care** - most optometrists provide a wide range of eye care services, but some specialize (pediatrics, low vision, contact lenses, binocular vision); you should visit specialty practices if you already have an interest in a specialized area.

- **Personal Interactions** - because optometry is a primary care discipline, optometrist interact face-to-face with people and are directly involved in solving clinical problems; you should observe this aspect of care and be satisfied that you would be comfortable with it.

- **Technology** - optometry relies heavily upon instrumentation and technology; you should observe the demands of working with instruments and keeping up with technology in a private practice; you might also inquire about the cost!

- **Satisfaction** - you should ask practitioners if they enjoy practice and if they have frustrations; you can certainly learn by their experiences and comments in making up your own mind about whether applying to optometry school is for you.

A growing percentage of applicants to the UAB School of Optometry have not only visited practices and “shadowed” optometrists, but also have acquired actual work experience in a practice or other setting in which eye care was provided. Unquestionably, such experience is an asset for an applicant because it indicates the individual has a good understanding of the clinical demands of the profession and is committed to it. No experience visiting practices and talking with practitioners is a wasted one, because there will inevitably be something observed or learned. You are encouraged to make these visitations and to use them to guide you in making a decision as to whether optometry seems the best “fit” for you.