



VA Quality Scholars Fellowship Program Frequently Asked Questions (VAQS FAQs)

1. What is the VAQS Fellowship?

The VA Quality Scholars program develops the next generation of health professionals to improve healthcare through innovations, quality improvement, and patient safety. The VA Quality Scholars program consists of 9 sites across the United States, as well as an affiliate site in Toronto, Canada. Each site in the US consists of a partnership between a VA hospital and an academic institution. The Coordinating Center at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas administers a 2-year, national curriculum along with a range of experiential training opportunities to the interprofessional, pre and postdoctoral fellows at each of the sites. Upon completing this program, fellows will demonstrate competence in:

- Interprofessional Collaboration and Teamwork
- Improvement Methods and Skills
- Organization and System Leadership for Quality and Safety
- Research
- Teaching and Learning

You will attend weekly didactic sessions, experiential learning sessions, fellows' meetings, UAB seminars, and other educational opportunities (such as Lean/Six Sigma training and certification, an advanced methods special interest group, and others). You will learn how to analyze problems in systems and clinical care, and how to address them through improvement science methods. You will learn to analyze data through statistical process control charts, to assess improvement interventions, and to measure processes and outcomes.

2. Is the fellowship limited to 2 years? Can I finish in 1 year?

The VAQS Fellowship is two years. There may be an opportunity to extend to a third year, but you must be able to commit to 2 years to complete the fellowship. You cannot complete the fellowship in 1 year.

3. Do I have to quit my job if I want to do this fellowship?

Yes, the VAQS Fellowship is FULL TIME. You will become a VA employee/trainee during the fellowship period.

4. Do I need to be on site (at the VA) every day or could I do this by distance learning?

You must be on-site. This fellowship is very much an experiential learning experience, and it cannot be accomplished through distance learning.

5. Will I have a mentor?

Mentorship is a critical component of this fellowship. Fellows typically have several mentors both inside and outside of the VA, depending upon the fellow's interests and professional goals. Your VAQS faculty can help you to identify appropriate mentors.

6. What is the scholarly expectation of me from the program?

Scholarship is foundational to the VAQS fellowship. You will be expected to present QI and/or research findings and to publish. Expect to publish at least 1 manuscript while in the program.

7. Is my research restricted only to the VA?

Not necessarily. At the BVAMC you can work with researchers at UAB, but you will conduct several quality improvement projects at the BVAMC. In order to conduct research at the VA, you must have a VA researcher or VA mentor and abide by all VA regulations.

8. Am I expected to start my own project or am I placed on an existing team?

We highly encourage you to work on an existing team to jump start your scholarship. However, you are also encouraged to work on your own projects in your area(s) of interest. You will have the opportunity to present your work locally and nationally at VAQS Summer Institute.

9. What is the classroom commitment?

The VAQS Fellows meet every Friday morning at 8:00 am for 90 minutes with UAB fellows and faculty from the Center for Outcomes and Effectiveness Research and Education ([COERE](#)) which is the hub for several training programs. We also have didactic classes every Friday at 1:00 PM for up to two hours; in addition, fellows and faculty meet prior to most classes.

10. Is there funding for travel to national meetings?

The annual VAQS Summer Institute, typically held in August every year, is mandatory and is funded by the VA. Fellows may receive funds from the VA Office of Research and Development that could be used for registration at professional meetings.

11. Are there funds or tuition support to pursue other degrees during the fellowship?

No funds are available that are earmarked to support tuition. Full time doctoral degree completion at the School of Nursing may offer tuition support, pending availability. All degree-conferring activities must be approved by our training site, be part of the national curriculum, with off-site participation of no more than 20% of the time.

12. What resources will I have to support my research? Do I have a dedicated campus work space?

The BVAMC provides dedicated office space, a VA computer, and administrative support for pay, leave, and travel. The VHA National Desktop Library is an online medical library available to staff VA-wide that provides full-text access to clinical textbooks, journals, and databases. UAB resources are available to fellows with a UAB-affiliation.

13. Can I get a job in the VA afterwards?

This fellowship positions you well for a competitive resume. Many graduates of this program are hired by the VA for high level quality improvement and other positions.

14. Do I have a commitment to work at the VA afterwards?

There is no commitment to work in the VA after graduation from the VAQS Fellowship, although many graduates choose to remain with the VA.

15. Will I be able to maintain clinical skills and activities?

Physicians must spend 20% of the time in clinical, which equates to about 4-8 hours a week or 1 day of clinic/OR a week. Nurse practitioners must also keep up clinical skills.

16. Could physicians participate in a clinical fellowship at the same time of VAQS?

No, you will have to step out of your GME fellowship to become a VAQS fellow.

16. Will I be eligible to receive health insurance benefits?

Yes, as a Federal employee, you may be able to enroll in health, dental, vision and life insurance ([link](#)).

17. How much vacation and sick time do I get in a year?

You accrue annual and sick leave each year (~13 days each).

18. If I am a VA employee now and decide to do the fellowship for 2 years, do I earn retirement benefits during those 2 years?

No, this fellowship is a non-retirement benefit earning position.

19. What is the salary/stipend?

You will receive/earn a stipend in accordance with your status. As an example, a physician finishing a 3-year residency would receive pay commensurate with of a PGY 4. Pharmacist fellows are paid a salary equal to that of a BVAMC PGY 2 pharmacy resident. Pre-doctoral and post-doctoral nurses are paid a stipend commensurate with pre- and post-doctoral NIH fellows.

20. Can I supplement the stipend salary?

Program leaders must review and approve any supplements. You may supplement your salary to no more than 20% effort above and beyond the fellowship. You MAY not receive a fellowship stipend from another federal agency at the same time. There may be opportunities for adjunct positions (up to 20% effort) within the Schools of Medicine and/or Nursing, depending on your interests and the needs of the respective schools.

21. How do I apply to the fellowship?

Submit a Letter of Intent (LOI) and a CV to Tracey Dick PhD, RN, CNE, COI, CPPS (tdick@uab.edu; nurse applicants), Carlos Estrada, MD, MS, (Carlos.Estrada@va.gov or cestrada@uabmc.edu; physician applicants), or Jarrett Wright, PharmD, MSHI (Jarrett.Wright@va.gov; pharmacy applicants) no later than December 1st. In the LOI, indicate your main area of interest, desired outcome after the fellowship,

and include the contact information for 3 references (name, title, email address). Fellows are interviewed in person or via phone. Fellows offered a position are expected to complete all documentation by mid-February. This is not a J-1 or H1-B opportunity. Additional information available at: <https://www.vaqs.org> .

21. What about COVID vaccination?

The VA Office of Academic Affiliations ([OAA](#)) requires COVID vaccination (or approved exception) is a requirement for VA employment for health professional trainees.

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