

■ The Medical School Application from the Other Side: Suggestions from the Medical School Admissions Office

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Premedical advisors work very closely with applicants from their colleges and universities to help them prepare for medical school and submit competitive applications. With the availability of information from the premedical office, from preparation books, from coaching services, and from the Internet, one might hope that applicants would be well informed about components of a successful application. And, in fact, most applicants complete application materials appropriately and submit materials in a timely manner. That said, many applicants still seek information (and assurance) from medical school admissions officers. Despite the glut of information available from the above resources, and from paper and electronic materials prepared and disseminated by individual medical schools, some applicants continue to have questions about the medical school application, and wonder how medical schools' admissions committees evaluate those submitted materials. The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide information "from the other side," giving tips on how to complete the application, prepare for the interview, and respond to the Admission Committee's selection decision to accept or reject. To that end, this paper is written to prospective applicants in a collective voice from the perspective of two experienced medical school admissions deans.

The Big Picture

We suspect that nobody ever told you this, but getting into medical school is very easy. You just need to be the kind of student that medical schools seek to graduate. Find out exactly what the medical school is looking for in an appli-

cant, and tailor your application to those school requirements and expectations. With the help of your premedical advisor, structure a solid curriculum: make the grades, do well on your Medical College Admission Test, seek confirmatory experiences in medical settings, demonstrate your well roundedness, and show your ability to communicate with others effectively. Work with your advisor to properly construct an application, and make sure the information you submit is exactly what the admissions committee members are looking for. But recognize that different medical schools will have different missions, and as a result, different emphases: primary care, research, preparation of students to enter academic medicine careers, or focus on selecting state residents to care for their state population, etc.

The one thing that medical school admissions committee members do have in common across all medical schools is the following four questions they will ask about you (and your readiness to be a medical student and a physician) as they consider your file:

- Can you do it?
- Will you do it?
- Should you do it?
- Should you do it *here*, at our school?

Can You Do It?

Individuals at medical schools who screen your file are looking first and foremost for the answer to this question. For the 2009 entering class, 121 of 130 medical schools across the United States participated in the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS)

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hosted by the Association of American Medical Colleges. The AMCAS application is a powerful tool available to you to allow you to present personal information and evidence that will make the answers to the four questions posed previously clear to admissions committees.

Medical school admissions officers look at the information included in the AMCAS application to gauge your academic accomplishments in college in order to predict your capacity to deal effectively with the academic rigors of medical school. First off, your grades will be reviewed. Using your official transcripts, AMCAS calculates three grade point averages (GPAs): BCPM — biology, chemistry, physics, and math, also known as the Science GPA; AO — all other, also known as the non-science GPA, and total or cumulative GPA. These grade point averages are calculated by year in college so that admissions committees can see grade trends. (Grade trends in a nutshell: Good — if grades are uniformly high over time; Could be Good — if grades greatly improve over time, and in the more difficult courses that are usually taken as one moves through the latter stages of his or her major; and, Generally Bad — if grades are consistently weak or take a nosedive over time.) Along with grades and grade trends, admissions committee members also consider the undergraduate institution(s) attended, strength of curriculum, and personal situations (usually described in the personal statement) which may have provided distractions or impediments to academic success.

Looking at your AMCAS application online, admissions officers can also see whether you've applied to their medical school previously, your residency status, college major, year of anticipated or earned degree(s), courses taken by semester, and probably most significantly Medical College Admission Test scores (MCAT). Scores on the MCAT are usually deemed to be very important by medical schools because they indicate achievement in science, verbal reasoning and communication skills. MCAT scores have also demonstrated the ability to predict which students have the capacity to do well in the medical school curriculum, and may be predisposed to also perform well on standardized tests (an important consideration since medical students must record passing scores on a series of standardized examinations in order to obtain licensure to practice medicine). While we strongly recommend that students prepare for the MCAT examination, and don't take it "cold" to find out what it is like,

some students find that they need to repeat the MCAT to achieve a competitive score. Medical schools differ on how they consider multiple MCAT scores submitted by an applicant. Some take the average score, some take the most recent score, and some "eyeball" improvement on each of the four sections. In any event, take the MCAT either before or very early in your application cycle as most schools will not screen your application until a recorded MCAT score is part of your file.

Will You Do It?

Admission committee members look at what you say and what you do to get a sense of your passion for medicine. Explore medicine and get firsthand exposure to the profession by shadowing physicians and volunteering to assist patients in health related settings. Such experiences help confirm your intent, motivation, and commitment to a life in medicine. The AMCAS application gives you an opportunity to describe a variety of experiences that you have taken part in which have helped forge your personality and your view on life. The 15 different experiences that you can describe on your AMCAS application include: employment, military service, community service, medical/clinical volunteer, research, teaching or tutoring, honors/awards/recognition, conferences attended, presentations and posters, publications, extracurricular hobbies and avocations, leadership, intercollegiate activities, artistic endeavors, and other experiences. You have the opportunity in the AMCAS application to describe the extent and timeframe of your efforts in each of these areas, and to tell what you did and what you learned. Take advantage of the chance to use these descriptions of your activities to demonstrate your leadership, communication skills, compassion, problem-solving abilities, trust, tenacity, altruism, and ability to be a team player. Overall, most medical schools want to see in depth, personally meaningful experiences and insights rather than a laundry list of superficial endeavors. This is an excellent place to show that you have experienced the world of medicine firsthand and to demonstrate your passion for the profession.

Another important section on the AMCAS application is the Personal Statement. Everybody has a story — this is where you tell yours. But think carefully about the message and the image of yourself that you hope to convey to the reader. One way to structure the Personal Statement is to cite personal experiences

and give specific examples that illustrate your message. Use your communication skills to demonstrate your desire and enthusiasm for a medical career. This is your opportunity to add relevant information about who you are as a person that may not be found elsewhere in your application, and allows you to demonstrate your unique characteristics, insights, or experiences that separate you from other applicants.

As a final word on the preparation of your medical school application, work with your premedical advisor on a regular basis, listen to him or her, take advantage of their experience and let them guide you. Get familiar with the various components of the AMCAS application, and start early in completing the form. Take your time and do not rush. Take full advantage of the entire application, thoughtfully completing all sections, and demonstrate that you are THE applicant the medical school seeks to admit. Before you submit your application, make sure it is error free, including having no mistakes in grammar and punctuation. Have someone you trust proofread and critique your application. And send in the AMCAS application well ahead of the medical school's submission deadlines. Many schools have rolling admissions, and thus consider files on a first come, first served basis.

Should You Do It?

One way that admissions committee members gather personal insight as to whether you should do medicine is through the admissions interview. As you prepare for your interview, you have two areas to consider: first, your own preparation for a medical career and your passion for medicine; and second, why your medical education goals could be well met at the school where you will be interviewing. To have been invited for interview, you have likely demonstrated in your application that you have studied hard, worked hard, and been involved. As you prepare for the interview, consider why you have decided on a medical career, and be able to articulate reasons for this choice of profession clearly. Many students find that if they have kept a journal of their medically related experiences, it is useful to look over those journal entries and ponder what they learned about themselves and the profession as a result of those experiences. Such a review is a good reflection exercise prior to your interview. We also suggest that you visit the medical school(s) that interest you ahead of time to become familiar with the institution, its history and mission, its curriculum, and its place in the community or region

where it resides. Admissions committee members are usually impressed with students who have done their homework, are knowledgeable about the medical school, and demonstrate enthusiasm about becoming a medical student at that institution.

Once you receive an invitation to interview, follow some basics of common courtesy. Respond promptly to the invitation; ask to change the interview date only if necessary (admissions officers must coordinate the schedules of many, many individuals over the course of the admissions cycle); and meet all deadlines for requests for additional information that may be sent by the admissions office. On the interview day, be prepared to make a good and lasting impression. Locate the interview site ahead of time and be prompt. Come dressed professionally and aware of the impression you want to make. Remember your manners: firm handshake, eye contact, and a nice smile. Demonstrate your confidence and self-assurance. Most importantly, be yourself. Engage your interviewer, but don't try to "read" him or her. Most interviewers are very skilled in talking to applicants. You likely cannot predict what they want you to say in response to all questions. That said, have in mind what you want your interviewer to know about you. As you talk about your preparation for a medical career, don't prevaricate or embellish, and remember: *you don't have to explain what you don't say*. As the interview comes to a close, ask questions if you have them. And, most interviewers won't mind if you ask for feedback at the end of your interview session.

Should You Do It Here?

The admissions committee members will consider your application after interview. At most schools, your application will fall into one of three areas: hold, accept or reject. If the committee holds your application, know that they are interested, but aren't ready for a final decision. Some admissions officers may choose to share committee concerns that led to the hold decision which might include grades, MCATS, exposure to medicine, or interpersonal skills. Keep in touch with the admissions offices during the application cycle and forward supplementary information, as requested, until a final decision is made.

But what about the other decisions? If you are accepted, congratulations! It is generally advisable to say "yes" to the first school that accepts you, even if

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it isn't your first choice. Schools will request additional information prior to matriculation, which will likely include final transcripts, financial aid information, immunization records, and completion of various school forms. Again, strive to meet all deadlines. If you are accepted at more than one school, that is great, too. Certainly, you will select the school that is the best match for you. But once you have decided *please* tell the schools where you are declining their offer of admission as soon as possible. All medical schools have more competitive applicants than they have open positions. As a courtesy to those students (and to the medical school), please give up your position in a timely manner so that another worthy student can make arrangements to start medical school.

What if you are not accepted? Know that rejection happens to the majority of applicants. You are not alone, and you have not been singled out. Whatever emotion you have, make sure it is under control. Get over being angry, hurt, or sad, and use your energy to help you improve your application. Contact the school where you were rejected. Ask for an appoint-

ment with the admissions officer to learn what you might do to present a more competitive set of credentials. Seek their recommendations for improvement and write them down. (But note that most schools won't make you any promises regarding subsequent admission.) That said, make a plan of action and act quickly. Don't delay; use your time wisely to retool weaker aspects of your preparation. In particular, if you need better scores on the MCAT, prepare for the examination differently than you did previously. Overall, in considering the files of rejected applicants in subsequent admissions cycles, admission committee members are looking for evidence that demonstrates your drive, determination and willingness to work toward your goal of becoming a physician. They are also, of course, looking for documentation of improvement. So along with additional grades or new MCATS, submit new letters of evaluation. In your next application, provide the committee members with a "road map" of how you have worked to enhance your credentials and let them know what you have learned from these new efforts and experiences.

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