

Six Admissions Factors for Medical School (Modified from Publication by Milligan College)

As a student who is contemplating applying to medical school you have probably wondered how your credentials compare with some ideal student conceived in your own mind or transmitted through the premed grapevine. Although you want a realistic appraisal of your chances for acceptance, a definitive answer is impossible; and a generalized answer is difficult, given that there are more than 120 medical schools in the United States and each has its own admissions committee with its own standards. These variables make it difficult to define one set of standards that apply in all medical schools. However, almost all medical schools consider the following six factors when reviewing applicants:

1. Academic Credentials

- What is the applicants' grade point average (GPA)?
- What is the science and math GPA?
- What are the grades in courses prerequisite for medical school?
- What are the grades in organic chemistry?
- What is the pattern of grades? Is there an upward or downward trend?
- How many courses been dropped? Why?
- How many "incompletes" are present?
- What proportion of courses was taken Pass/Fail?
- Did the student consistently choose an "easier" or more difficult sequence of courses?
- What is the academic quality of the institution where courses were taken?
- Was summer school attended? What school? What courses were taken? Why?
- Did the student undertake honors work?
- What is the student's major?

Grade point average is important, but as the preceding questions indicate, the GPA alone is **not** the only academic factor considered. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assign a percentage to each factor that is considered; and each bit of information contributes in much the same way that pieces of a jigsaw puzzle finally comprise a picture. Usually no one piece of information alone is sufficient to ruin your chances; instead, view the process as one where you want to contribute the best "pieces," as many positive "pieces" as possible, and enough of them so that the committee can come up with the best "picture" of your potential.

2. Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)

- What is the student's percentile ranking?
- What is the score for each section?
- Is there a low score on one section of the test? If so, which section?
- Are there any factors that might account for poor performance?
- How do these scores compare with those of other candidates from the same institution?
- Are the scores consistent with the GPA? How do they compare with the GPA?

In general medical schools seem to be looking for applicants with scores at or above the fiftieth percentile, depending on other factors such as GPA. A low score on one section could be a problem, one extraordinary score, noteworthy; but committees are interested in the total profile of the MCAT and how that fits with the total picture of the candidate.

The MCAT is usually taken in the spring of the junior year; however, it is advisable to only take the MCAT once the prerequisite courses have been satisfactorily completed. The MCAT now contains significant amounts of biochemistry & completing at least through Biochemistry I prior to the exam is advised. The MCAT includes the following sections:

1. Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems
2. Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems
3. Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior
4. Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills

For more information on studying for the MCAT, see the AAMC website or Mrs. Gean.

While grades and MCAT are not everything, they are primary to the admissions picture. To illustrate, a medical school may have four thousand or more applicants for one hundred places. In order to determine whom to select for entrance, the members of the admissions committee may choose one thousand candidates to interview. They usually choose those with high "numbers" (grades and MCAT's). From this pool of one thousand, they are able to find applicants what have, in addition to high "numbers," the human traits that will enable them to become good doctors.

Note that the first demographics that a medical school will see about you is your grades/MCAT score. Make sure that those scores are promote you as a candidate.

3. Life Experience

Of particular interest to committee members is the quality of the activities in which you have participated, and what you learned from them. Consider exploring some of the following:

Health Care-Related -- "the unwritten requirement for medical school"

- Has the applicant worked/volunteered in a clinical health care-related setting?
- Has the applicant gained a realistic picture of the career field they seek to enter?
- Has the applicant had contact with patients? Used interpersonal and communication skills?

Note: Direct patient care is not expected of premedical students, but spending time in a facility with a doctor through shadowing is required.

Work

- Has the applicant worked while attending college? In the summer? How much?
- Has this affected time available to devote to studies and extracurricular activities?

Service

- What kind of service experience has the applicant had?
- What was the extent and quality of these experiences?
- Is there a demonstrated commitment to helping others?
- What has the applicant done to become aware of the needs of people unlike himself/herself?

Extracurricular

- Is the student able to participate in activities and still maintain high grades?
- Did the student assume leadership roles? Work as part of a team?
- Is there a sustained commitment?
- What is the quality of these activities? What did the student get out of the activities?
- Are there a variety of activities?

Research

- Has the applicant had research experience? Lab? Clinical? At what level? Independent? Collaborative? Publications? Presentations/Posters?

Teaching/Instructional/Counseling

- Has the student been a teaching assistant? Counselor? Peer advisor?

You need not demonstrate competence in all of these areas; nor can you turn to a magical formula for combining activities to "look good." Most admissions committee members are experienced in their work, and may have an instinct for detecting the credentials that have been put together for the purpose of "getting into medical school." In general, they prefer a genuine person, so pursue in some depth and breadth the activities that are of interest to you and that are congruent with your personality and life goals.

4. Letter of Evaluation and Recommendations

Up to this point, the committee will have been looking at a mostly "skeletal" outline. While your application essay will help to fill in the picture, the letters of recommendation help even more, in that they contribute information on how recommenders who are experienced in working with students view you. A well-composed letter helps to answer three big questions: What are your personal traits? Intellectual traits? Social traits? Consider who would write you the most appropriate letter to convey those traits. In general you will need 3 letters: 1. Academic (FHU provides a committee letter with multiple faculty input. Those are only composed in the spring/summer. 2. Doctor (Note that some DO schools do require a DO to write your letter.) 3. Free Choice (Choose someone who knows you well and can answer the the three big questions above best.)

5. The Application

The completed application, which includes an essay, contributes to the total picture that is being formed.

- Was the application submitted in a timely manner?
- What is the content of the essay?
- Can the applicant write well? Spell? Organize information?
- What is the applicant's state of residence? Age? Citizenship? Minority status?

6. The Interview

After an admissions committee finishes looking at the "paper credentials," it is ready to make some observations in person, in the form of an interview, to try to answer questions like the following: What are the applicant's communication skills? Personality? Goals? Appearance? What aspects that are not clear in the application can be clarified?

After the interview, the medical school admissions committee has a fuller picture which it uses to compare the applicant with others in the pool of candidates from which it ultimately makes its choice. Naturally, this method is not perfect because it is administered by people who are not perfect, but at most medical schools it seems to be administered with a great deal of human concern.

"Are my Credentials Competitive?"

There are many variables in the six admission factors given above, and there are many variables in the opinions of the members of the various admissions committees, so the choice of candidates is not totally predictable. However, it is not totally unpredictable, either. Within wide parameters it is possible for you to look at your credentials, reviewing the six admission factors as an admissions committee would, and find at least a tentative answer to the question, "Are my credentials competitive to apply to medical school?" You can also further explore this question with a health careers advisor and plan steps to take to strengthen your credentials.

Your Conduct and Credit Records

"Were you ever the recipient of any action by any college or medical school for unacceptable academic performance or conduct violation, even though such action may not have interrupted your enrollment or required you to withdraw?"

The American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS), used by the majority of medical schools in the United States, includes the above question on its application. Trustworthiness and good judgement are essential qualities for someone who seeks to enter a health profession. As you go through your college career, be aware that actions that reflect negatively on your character, judgement, or honesty may seriously diminish your chances of admission to a health professions school.

You should expect to borrow to pay for medical school. In order to be able to get loans you will need to have a good credit rating. Medical schools have rescinded an acceptance when a student's credit rating was poor.

Pre-Med Timeline

Freshman Year

Although some schools may require a couple extra courses (look at the AMCAS publication, the MSAR, for the school you are applying to), in general the **basic*** requirements are:

- Biology (1 year with lab)
- Physics (1 year with lab)
- Chemistry (2 years, General and Organic Chemistry with lab)
- English (1 year)

*To increase the competitiveness of your MCAT score, you will need to supplement this list with courses such as A&P, cell biology, biochemistry, psychology, & upper division biology courses. Many schools have opted to remove all prerequisites; however, the MCAT's content provides an indicator about how much you have retained as an undergraduate.

As you can see from the basic requirements, students may choose any major. At medical school, you'll find students who majored in literature, economics, computer engineering, biology, chemistry, and pharmacy. The most important factor is that you choose something that interests you and in which you excel (i.e., getting mostly A's and B's).

Complete **General Chemistry** and at least one other science premed requirement. Taking **General Chemistry** early allows you to take **Organic Chemistry** the following year. Why do you want to do this? This allows you to retake the course if you do poorly, and it also allows you to get it out of the way so that you can take interesting upper division courses in your major without being overworked. Admissions committees look at a student's performance in Organic Chemistry as an indication of that student's ability to handle the course work in medical school. So if you did poorly in Organic (i.e. less than a B-), you may consider retaking the course in the summer between your Sophomore and Junior year, or your Junior year. You may have to retake the course at another school.

You should decide during your Freshman Year what extracurricular activities you would like to pursue during your undergraduate career. This includes both volunteering and being involved in organizations. Think about what you like to do. Pick a couple activities and stay with them throughout your undergraduate program, but try to stay away from being too spread out and not being able to contribute significantly in **any** of your activities.

Some students may have to work to put themselves through school. Just pick one extracurricular activity that is important to you for now. Working and paying your way through college is admirable, it demonstrates your ability to assume responsibility and stay focused with your goals.

Towards the end of this year, begin thinking about what you want to do for the summer. Scholarly endeavors in research laboratories look good on an application; however, this may be attainable during the school year. Shadowing is important for demonstrating that you have given serious consideration for the medical field.

Sophomore Year

By now, you should have completed your **General Chemistry** requirement and one other premed science requirement. Plan to tackle **Organic Chemistry** this year and finish another science premed requirement. If you do poorly in any of these courses (less than a B-), you should consider re-taking those courses. You also want to demonstrate educational interests beyond science. Take literature, humanities, or foreign language courses. For those not majoring in science, you have an advantage here -- your education interests are already diverse. Just keep in mind that the breadth of your education is just as important as the level of difficulty. However, a second major is not always to your advantage. Having some credit in other fields demonstrates depth as well as a second major. The second major does not give you an edge in the application process.

For the **Summer**, plan on pursuing your research, shadow, volunteer, and extracurricular interests. You should also consider starting studying for the MCAT.

Junior Year

This is the big year. You are completing the remainder of your premed courses, taking the MCAT, and preparing your application to medical school, in addition to doing well in your course work. This may seem difficult. It is. Don't worry, however, with some organization and a plan, you will be able to accomplish these goals.

It is time to seriously study for the MCAT by scheduling blocks of time for reviewing your completed science courses. During the last month prior to the April MCAT, take as many MCAT practice tests as you can (full-length ones if possible). MCAT prep courses through services such as Kaplan can be expensive. Most data collected supports that reviewing course materials & taking as many practice exams as possible are the most effective study tool.

Start writing your personal essay during the **during the spring semester**. Make sure you write, re-write...and then re-write some more. This is one of the most important elements in your application since it allow the admissions committee to know you better.

When the applications are available in the **Spring**, review an application from AMCAS and the non-AMCAS schools. An electronic version of the AMCAS application is the only one now available.

Send in your application to AMCAS as early as possible. Many schools work on a rolling admission system and bring in students for interviews as soon as they see them. Remember that the majority of US AMCAS applications are submitted by **June 30**; don't be late. Be sure to keep a copy for yourself. Send in your non-AMCAS applications as well. Letters of recommendation will be sent to your schools from your premed advisor, or individuals you have selected (see the page about recommendation letters to determine who you should ask). Complete the any secondary application requests, or school specific requirements, that are requested of you.

Aim to have our application materials (i.e. MCAT scores, secondary applications with fee, letters of recommendation, transcript, and your photographs) completed and submitted to the schools by **August**. This is important. The sooner you have your application completed, the better. This considerably increases your chances of becoming accepted.

Senior Year

Your hard work and preparation in the previous year will pay off. If you have submitted all your application materials by **August**, you just need to relax and wait for interviews.

Enjoy your final year in college and start preparing for the interview. Invitations for interviews will generally come in **October** and later. The invitation may also come sooner if you completed your application before **August**. At your interview, inquire about the notification process for the individual school

Search for sources of financial aid using the Internet, as well as the guides available through the medical schools that you are considering attending.

Acceptance, waiting lists, and rejections are sent out at different schedules, depending on the school. Some schools have rolling admissions, where offers for admission are sent out after each admissions committee meeting. At other programs, offers may not be sent out until after a set deadline.

If you are placed on the waiting list, there are several things you can do. First, update your application by sending in your first semester grades from your senior year, recent publications or awards, or even a letter stating your interest in attending that school.

In the circumstance you are not offered an acceptance, you should review your application with your pre-med advisor and determine your strengths and weaknesses. You may want to spend a year polishing your application for resubmission.

Remember that Mrs. Gean is here to help you through this process. Don't be a stranger.