Preparing for Medical School

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APPLYING TO MEDICAL SCHOOL

MAKING THE DECISION TO APPLY
Each year the majority of applicants to medical school are REJECTED. In order to be successful, you must complete necessary pre-requisite courses, earn good grades, including a solid MCAT score, and explore your commitment to becoming a physician by job shadowing, researching, volunteering and developing leadership skills. In addition, you will need solid mentor relationships with professors and physicians for strong letters of recommendation.

This is not a course you can accomplish in a short amount of time. Therefore, before you decide to apply, make sure you’ve thoroughly evaluated your preparation tactics and are in a good place to be successful. If you are entering Ave Maria with the plan of going to Med-school, make sure you develop a four year plan during your first semester on campus.

QUALIFYING FOR MED SCHOOL
Admissions committees in general look for these three things:

- A strong GPA and MCAT score showing a high probability of future success.
- Letters of recommendation from professionals showing the applicant’s maturity & commitment.
- Informed decision-making based on research experiences, shadowing, volunteering, informational interviews and internships. Healthcare exposure is critical.

Undergraduate major does not matter. The best course of action is to major in a subject in which you can excel while also completing the pre-req courses for med school. The requirements of the majority of medical schools include two courses in biology, general chemistry, and physics. Some medical schools require one or two courses in calculus, biochemistry and English. In 2015 the MCAT is also adding sections in psychology and sociology so coursework in those subjects should help you.

Because of the competition for getting into Med School, high cumulative GPAs (3.5 and up) and particularly good grades in pre-requisite courses are essential for a student applying to medical school from a small liberal arts college such as Ave Maria. Note that med schools will often average grades together if you retake a course (same with MCAT scores) so aim to do your best the first time around. Talk with an advisor if you have concerns about grades. Independent research or acing the next highest course may help to mitigate a less than stellar grade. Taking a year off before applying to medical school will also allow you to include senior year grades in your application.

MCAT
Doing well on the Medical School Admissions Test (MCAT) is critical for admissions as this is usually one of the first criteria used to weed out candidates. Scoring a 30 or better will significantly increase your chances of acceptance. Serious thought should be devoted to a plan for MCAT study, including being ready to take the exam in spring of Junior year (if you plan to enter Med School immediately).

The best information regarding the MCAT is still found via the AAMC website: https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/. Note that major changes to the MCAT are coming in 2015. Make sure you are studying the right material to be prepared. In 2013 and 2014 you can also opt to take trial sections of the test when you sit for the exam and receive a $30 amazon gift card.
The current MCAT (for 2013 and 2014) is divided into 4 multiple choice sections, 3 of which are scored: Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning and Biological Sciences. There are 25 exam dates throughout the year and registration takes place online (https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/reserving/). Plan your test date according to application timelines. Plan to only take the MCAT once and score your best the first time around. Test-taking costs $270.

Many students enroll in an MCAT prep course or invest in other kinds of exam prep. There are also a variety of free websites and resources online that provide tips and sample questions. A comprehensive overview of prep options is available here: http://www.medicalschoolhq.net/mcat-prep/.

**LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION**
Recommendations should be from a faculty member or healthcare professional who really knows your caliber of work and capabilities, as well as your personality. Each school will have different requirements about the number and source of your letters so research this well in advance of deadlines.

You will need to start months, if not years, in advance of your application deadline to ensure you have strong letters of recommendation. Develop relationships with science faculty by doing well in class, seeking additional research opportunities, and making use of office hours. When you approach a faculty member about writing letters of recommendation have a clear outline of where you are considering applying and rely on this person to help you evaluate programs. You should also provide your letter writers with plenty of advance notice (a month is a good time frame) and as much information about your personal goals, the school, and your past accomplishments as possible. The same applies to professionals in the field. You will need to develop relationships by job shadowing, interning, and informational interviewing and then maintaining a strong connection over time. (View Ave Maria Career Services Guide to Applying to Graduate School for additional tips on letters of recommendation.)

**PERSONAL STATEMENTS**
You will have to write a personal statement as part of the general AMCAS application and as part of your individual applications to medical schools. These statements need to be original, honest, and well written. Common mistakes include:

- Using a cliché or contrived format (i.e. not being personal enough)
- Exceeding space limitations
- Using overlong or non-relevant quotes
- Not conveying passion or genuine interest in caring for others
- Showing interest for the wrong reasons (salary, prestige, etc.)
- Poor or incorrect grammar and spelling

Write with honesty, authenticity and specificity. A personal statement is weak if you do not clearly demonstrate your desire to become a physician with supporting evidence such as volunteer and extracurricular activities and a lifestyle of caring. By reading the personal statement you should be able to convince a stranger that you have given serious thought to your intended career path (and specify what kind of medicine you want to pursue), and demonstrate why you know you will succeed.
COMMON APPLICATION SERVICES (THE AMCAS)
Nearly all schools require an application through The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) at [www.aamc.org/amcas](http://www.aamc.org/amcas). Additional services include Texas Medical and Dental Schools Application Service at [www.utsystem.edu/tmdsas](http://www.utsystem.edu/tmdsas/) and the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service at [https://aacomas.aacom.org](https://aacomas.aacom.org). Once you’ve completed and paid for the common application individual schools will send you secondary applications.

Due to the highly competitive admissions process, most students apply to SEVERAL medical schools to increase odds of admission. Recognize that applying will take a lot of time and money and carefully plan ahead. Many schools have rolling admissions processes which means you will have a better chance of being admitted earlier in the year. Applications open in June and the early admission deadline is August 1, so use your summer wisely.

In addition to the AMCAS and secondary applications you will also need personal statements, letters of recommendations, transcripts and test scores. Your application cannot be processed without all elements. Request your transcripts (from ALL undergraduate institutions) and letters of recommendation well in advance of when you will need them. Keep photocopies of all of your submissions as well as notes about deadlines and submission dates.

A comprehensive guide to completing the AMCAS is available here: [http://www.medicalschoolhq.net/amcas-application/](http://www.medicalschoolhq.net/amcas-application/).

MEDICAL SCHOOL INTERVIEWS
Many medical schools will require an interview as part of the admissions process. An interview is as much about evaluating your potential fit in the program as it is evaluating your ability to communicate with future patients. It is extremely important to be prepared to answer questions about your AMCAS application and activities you described there and your motivation for pursuing medical school.

Each school will be different but there are some common questions asked. A very few schools (Stanford is one) are now using a method called the MMI, Multiple Mini Interview. If one of your schools uses the MMI method you will need to prepare differently. Seek additional resources to help you.

**Personality**
- Tell me about yourself/family.
- What do you do during your spare time?
- What book outside of school have you read recently and why?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses?
- Tell me about your research.
- Tell me about your (most significant) volunteer work. (Question could inquire specifically about something in your AMCAS or personal statement.)
- Who, in your life, has influenced you the most?
- How would a friend (or professor) describe you?
- Tell me about a time when you were disappointed and how you reacted.
- Are you a leader or a follower?
- Which of your college courses interested you the most?
- Which was the worst course you took in college and why? What was your grade in the class?
- How did you choose your undergraduate school?
• How are you planning to pay for medical school?
• What else should we know about you?
• What questions do you have for me?

Questions about Medicine/Your Career
• Why do you want to be a doctor?
• Since your decision to apply to med school, how have you confirmed your passion for medicine?
• If you are not admitted to a medical school, what profession would you pursue?
• What are your long term goals? Where do you see yourself in 10 years, 20 years?
• What do you think will be your greatest challenge in medical school?
• In your view, what is the most pressing problem facing medicine today?
• Which area of medicine interests you the most?
• What are your views on the Affordable Care Act?
• What do you think of abortion/euthanasia/etc.?

School Specific Questions
• Why do you want to pursue medicine (particular program) at this school?
• What are you looking for in a medical school?
• What unique quality do you bring to the entering class?
• Where else are you applying?

Review Ave Maria Career Services Interview Guide to full prepare for Medical School Admissions Interviews. Career Services can also conduct Med School Mock Interviews at any time.

Questions to ask during a visit or interview
During a visit you will hopefully have the chance to speak with current students (at various stages in the process), administrators and faculty outside of just the admissions interviewers. Question them on lifestyle, research, curriculum and grading. In an interview, if you’re invited to ask questions, ask questions along these lines:
• Are there any programs that this school is particularly well known for? Why?
• What do you see as the biggest challenge for new physicians in the next 10 years?
• What types of pre-clinical experiential learning opportunities are available?
• Are there common traits that the best students at this school possess? What are they?

AFFORDING MEDICAL SCHOOL
Before applying to medical school consider the financial cost involved. Admissions committees often will ask a question about finances to determine how realistic you are about your ability to finance an education (particularly if you are applying to private schools vs. state schools) and your understanding of your future earning potential and how much that factors into your desire to be a physician.
https://www.aamc.org/services/first/first_factsheets/94390/cost-applying-med-school.html

If you are interested in medical research, as opposed to being a physician, there is a good chance you will qualify for funding via the University. You have to be committed to research from the outset, however, and demonstrate this early on in your undergraduate career as well.
TIMELINE
If you wish to pursue medical school directly after graduation, this general timeline should keep you on track. Many students decide to take one or more years off before applying to med school. This option allows you to include all of your senior year grades in your GPA calculations and can give you time to more thoroughly explore career opportunities in the medical profession, thereby strengthening your application. Still factor in time to prepare for the MCAT (scores good for three years) and remember that you will still need letters of recommendation from faculty.

Freshman/Sophomore Years
1. Map out a four year academic plan which includes taking needed pre-requisites. If you have particular schools in mind already, review their requirements. In general you will need: Physics, Chem, Organic Chem, Biology (usually 2 years), English. Additionally, Psychology and Sociology are being added to the MCAT in 2015.
2. Start making relationships with science professors and advisors, letting them know now of your plans to attend Medical school. You will need strong relationships for letters of recommendation down the line.
3. Join the Biology club or other relevant student group to help you stay aware of resources available on campus and to meet with professionals for experiential learning opportunities.
4. Explore volunteer and extracurricular activities. It’s best to settle on one or two significant causes that you are involved with long term.

Summer:
1. Volunteer in a health care setting. This experience will not only strengthen your medical school application, but it may guide you in selecting a specific medical specialty. You may also make key connections with professionals that can write letters of recommendation for you later.
2. Research. Opportunities may be at Ave or other Universities. Explore Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) sponsored by the National Science Foundation (http://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/reu/). Apply for these during the Fall/Winter.

Junior Year
Fall semester:
1. Use this semester to lay the foundation for your applications and test taking. Meet with professors early and let them know you will be applying to med school. Start mentally compiling a list of those to write your letters of recommendation.
2. Ensure your academic progress is on track and your grades are strong.
3. Register to take the MCAT in the spring and then devote significant time and effort preparing.
4. Continue to seek clinical opportunities and deepen your ties to one or two volunteer or extracurricular opportunities.

Spring semester:
1. Take the MCAT.
2. Decide which type of program you want to apply to – MD, DO, MD/PhD, MD/MPH, etc.
3. Start thinking about your personal statement. This document can be a great tool to provide to your potential letter writers.
4. Request letters of recommendation. Do this in person and be up front, telling your letter writers all the places you will be applying. The more information they have the better letters they will be able to write for you.
Summer:
1. Request transcripts from any institution where you studied post-high school.
2. Compile other parts of your application and have everything (resume/CV, personal statement) thoroughly reviewed (professors, writing center, advisors, career services, peers, etc.)
3. Complete the AMCAS application.

Senior year

Fall semester:
1. Complete the secondary application for each medical school that sends you one (and do this promptly). Most schools have a secondary application and will send one to you after they receive your AMCAS application. Note: this requires additional application fees.
2. Keep reviewing your applications to ensure you do not miss any deadlines or special requests by any of your schools. Keep records of everything, particularly of your secondary applications.
3. Prepare for interviews. (Conduct at least one mock interview in preparation.)
4. Complete medical school interviews. (Remember to send thank you notes afterwards.)
5. Begin reviewing financial aid information for medical school. You will have to file FAFSA information after the first of the year.

Spring semester:
1. Review your options and select a school!
2. Notify any other schools where you were admitted to withdraw your candidacy and open up spaces in the class for someone else.
3. Congrats!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
The outline in this guide is meant to briefly help a student interested in going to medical school consider the necessary preparations it will take to be successful. Students interested in other health professions such as Dental School, Vet School, Physical Therapy, etc. can still use this in addition to the Graduate School Guide as base resources but should seek additional information online. A few helpful resources included below:

- Medical School HQ: simple, straightforward resource covering all aspects of preparing for, applying and choosing a medical school. Check out the podcasts (transcripts also available) for great information from Med School Admissions staff, current students, residents & doctors, and evaluations of many test prep and other resources. http://medicalschoolhq.net/
- The Student Doctor Network: Includes school specific information and also covers all pre-health topics relating to school choice, applications, and interviews. http://studentdoctor.net/
- Kaplan & Princeton Review: both companies provide instructional courses for taking the MCAT
- MCATforMe.com: provides flashcards and other study aids
- MCATquestion.com: a practice question of the day
- American Medical Student Association: http://www.amsa.org/
- Association of Accredited Naturopathic Medical Colleges: http://www.aanmc.org/
- Association of American Medical Colleges: https://www.aamc.org/
- Explore HEALTH Careers: http://explorehealthcareers.org/