

# Dunster Pre-Med Manual



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# Introduction

Welcome to the Dunster Premedical Manual! We hope to help you through the long, but eventually rewarding, process of applying to medical school. It is important to read and understand this manual as it explains the application process and the role played by the Dunster Premedical Committee.

As your Premedical Committee, we organize our activities with two goals in mind. First, we will help you decide if medicine is the right profession for you. As explained in the next section, medical training and the practice of medicine are extremely demanding endeavors, and it is absolutely essential that you make an informed decision to pursue medicine. Committing to medicine requires a great deal of soul searching and honest self-evaluation, and we will help you through this revealing and worthwhile process.

Second, we will guide you through the application process and help you maximize your chances of acceptance. This goal has greater importance because of the competitive nature of the application process.

How does the Dunster Premedical Committee achieve these goals? Our advising system consists of a personal and dedicated network of resident (live in-house) and non-resident (do not live in-house) premedical tutors. We are available to answer your questions in informal settings where we aim to help you with each step of the application process. You will be matched with a non-resident tutor in your sophomore year, in addition to having access to the Dunster resident tutors. Your tutor's role includes career advising, identifying strengths and weaknesses in your academic and extracurricular records, helping you with your application essay, writing your House Committee Letter, and providing general information about the application process. You are also welcome to approach any of our committee members with questions.

The admissions interview constitutes an important step in the application process—we provide mock interviews to prepare you for this event. In the spring, we meet individually with each of the students who are applying in the coming summer. These meetings are meant to familiarize you with the Premedical Committee and to begin your process of self-evaluation—they are not meant to be evaluative interviews.

Additionally, we will write a House Committee letter for each applicant. Drafted by your non-resident tutor and edited by the Premedical Committee resident tutors, the House letter is a summary statement of your high school background, academic and extracurricular achievements during College, and your personal qualities, character, and potential as a future physician. The House letter is a critical part of your application. We make significant effort to ensure the quality and timeliness of each letter. The letters are always positive, and your academic record, house questionnaire, extracurricular pursuits, letters of recommendations, personal essay, and relationship with your premedical advisor provide us with the material to generate the best possible statement. We also use the House letter to address and mitigate potential weaknesses in your application.

For those of you who are alumni, the Dunster Premedical Committee will serve you the same way that it serves those who are currently undergraduates. Applying to medical school following college graduation is increasingly common; in fact, more than half of medical school applicants

from Harvard College are alumni when they apply. Normally, we advise alumni until 5 years from graduation since our letter and our advising are not as relevant any further out of college, but we are flexible and willing to discuss best possible advising options for older alumni.

Although the Premedical Committee provides you with useful resources, getting into medical school ultimately depends on your own continued effort. This manual provides a springboard for further planning. Educate yourself on the current state of medicine; honestly evaluate your motivations for entering medicine; maintain a high level of academic performance; and be committed to your non-academic activities. Pay attention to the deadlines that are part of the application process. Good luck and we hope to be of help!

In addition to this guide, please refer to the Office of Career Services (OCS) website for many pre-med and pre-health details. You should look over the information on the OCS website thoroughly. If you cannot find the answer to your question in this document, it is likely on the OCS website:

<http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/medical-health>

# Deciding to apply

Modern medicine is a multi-faceted endeavor. Individuals with M.D. degrees, with or without other training, participate in activities as distinct from one another as basic science research and healthcare administration, patient care and public policy. Thus, a medical education can provide a wide variety of career options. Deciding to apply to medical school is the most important part of the application process. No brief description in any manual can adequately deal with such a complex issue. Experiences that will be helpful to you in making this decision might include conversations with physicians and medical students; personal experiences in medicine such as shadowing physicians, volunteering, or personal/family illness; and discussions with your premedical advisor and other Committee members. However, you should bear several things in mind as you consider your decision:

## **Devote time to analyzing your reasons for applying**

When did you first want to become a physician? What circumstances in your life have prompted you to contemplate this career? How do you picture yourself professionally in five, ten, even twenty years after graduating from medical school? What are your anxieties or fears about choosing a career in medicine? Are you ready to commit to the lifestyles and responsibility that fundamentally define the process of becoming and being a physician? Not only will considering these questions clarify your desire to pursue medical training, but it will also guarantee a more thoughtful application essay and leave you better prepared for probing questions from admissions officers.

## **Seek direct exposure to medicine**

Shadowing physicians and volunteering in hospitals, community health clinics, and other health-related settings are vital experiences in the process of deciding to apply. It is critical to spend some time in a health care environment to make an informed decision about whether medicine is the right choice for you. Medical schools value applicants who have been exposed to the practice of medicine and, from that exposure, have developed a sophisticated appreciation for some of the academic, professional, and personal challenges of a career in medicine. Responsible physicians are in a constant process of learning as you will see when shadowing—their education is never complete. To that extent, your exposure to medicine should include becoming acquainted with the broader trends in medicine as revealed in print media or through any of the many excellent courses offered in a variety of areas, from medical sociology and healthcare policy to international and public health.

## **Become familiar with the demands of medical training and the medical lifestyle**

Medicine is well known for placing superhuman demands on its practitioners. Medical school, particularly during the clinical years, and residency training frequently demand sleepless nights and 80+ hour workweeks. Post-graduate training towards board certification takes at minimum three or four post-graduate years of education (a.k.a. residency), and areas such as the surgical subspecialties demand seven to ten years of post-medical school training. In addition, owing to

the growing cost of medical education, the average medical school graduate finished medical school with \$139,517 in debt, not including undergraduate loans. Since salary during the residency years is modest, it can take years to pay off these loans. Thus, it is critical that you consider whether this sort of lifestyle is for you before deciding to apply to medical school. Are you willing to make the sacrifices in terms of your personal life to pursue a medical education? Are you willing to defer material gratification until well into your thirties while you complete your training and potentially amass a large amount of debt?

### **Acquaint yourself with the changes that are occurring in medicine**

Dramatic changes are happening within almost every aspect of our health care system. The physician in private practice is a dying breed. Increasingly, physicians work within large groups. Cost containing strategies have had a crucial impact everywhere within medicine. These changes have continued to lead to considerable decreases in physician autonomy, as administrators have increased say in what procedures and policies are appropriate and standard in the execution of healthcare. Physicians' salaries have plateaued or, in some cases, have even dropped in the last decade. Physicians are increasingly burdened with administrative work, taking them away from face-time with their patients. Finally, pressure to produce primary-care physicians has led to a decrease in the number of subspecialty training slots at teaching institutions. These subspecialty residencies are much more competitive than they were a decade ago.

### **Don't let your chances of admission unduly influence your choice of medicine as a career**

Although you know best your academic and personal history, you are not completely qualified to assess your chances of admission to medical school. Unlike law school admissions, where the strength of an applicant is best quantified by his or her LSAT score and GPA, medical school admissions committees give important weight to factors beyond standardized test scores (MCAT) and GPA. The in-person interview, the personal statement/essay, responses to questions on secondary applications, and letters of recommendation all play a significant role in the outcome of the admissions process. That said, if we had to pick one variable that best predicts the success of a Harvard undergraduate in the medical school application process, it would be GPA. Do yourself a favor and keep your GPA up starting now. This does not mean taking easy classes—medical schools are familiar with Harvard courses and can tell when students take easier courses merely to boost their GPA. We encourage you to select courses that interest, excite, and challenge you. But give careful consideration to your own abilities and time constraints before enrolling in five classes, doing a double-concentration, or taking more than two pre-med science courses in a semester.

Furthermore, in choosing your undergrad coursework, keep in mind that Harvard College provides you the unique opportunity to branch outside of medicine to explore other interests—whether these interests take the form of non-traditional pre-med concentrations, athletics, clubs, engagements at the Kennedy School, etc. Take advantage of all the opportunities available at Harvard to explore your interests and learn about the world.

### **Apply once you are sure you want to study medicine**

Applying to medical school is time-consuming, extremely expensive (the total expenditure can easily reach several thousand dollars), and emotionally demanding. Applying to medical school is also rather competitive: there are generally two to three applicants for every one spot. Medical schools accept candidates who are firmly committed to becoming physicians and tend to reject candidates who demonstrate inadequate thought into their own motivations for choosing medicine. The message is clear: apply to medical school only if you are fundamentally committed to becoming a doctor. It is better to take a few years off and approach the process with firm conviction rather than apply hastily with doubts. Medical schools are quite sophisticated at ferreting uncommitted candidates out.

### **Don't let family pressure unduly influence your choice of medicine as a career**

Family members can be an important source of advice about career choices. Family members who are medical professionals can provide exposure to various aspects of the medical lifestyle. However, families can sometimes exert undue pressure for or against the choice of medicine as a career. Remember that you are the one who will ultimately live with your career choice; you will be the person in medical school. You do yourself a grave disservice not to make your decision on this basis!

### **Consider other potential careers**

Given the difficulty of medical school admissions and the long duration of the training process, it may be helpful for you to contemplate other career options. Medicine is not always the green pastures and blue skies that it is portrayed as in popular media. If your desire to go to medical school stems mainly from a wish to help people, would dentistry, psychology, or social work satisfy this wish also? If the scientific aspects of medicine form the basis for your desire, would graduate school be more appropriate? How does medicine compare with other career options for you? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? These are also frequently addressed topics at medical school interviews. You need to know why you think medicine is the right thing for you as opposed to many other options you are certain to have.

# Pre-medical academic requirements

First things first: keep your grades up. Applicants with a GPA less than 3.2 have a difficult time in the admissions process. Grades matter.

## Courses at Harvard

IMPORTANT: PLEASE CONSULT the [Office of Career Services Guide for Premedical Students](#) for the most up-to-date discussion!

<http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/medical-health>

<http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/premed-academic-requirements>

Medical schools have basic academic course requirements for your pre-medical years. For specific schools, you should check the listings in the Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR), published annually by the Association of American Medical Colleges, and the AAMC website ([www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)). The MSAR is an excellent premedical resource for all students. Below are some general guidelines for courses at Harvard that will fulfill premedical requirements and prepare you for the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT).

## Courses outside of Harvard

Pre-medical academic requirements may also be met outside of Harvard. You may receive Harvard degree credit for summer school courses offered by the Harvard Summer School or you may petition (in advance) to receive Harvard credit for course work done at another institution. The petitioning process begins at OCS with the Credit Advisor who will supply you with a credit petition and answer any questions you may have about the process. The Faculty's Standing Committee on Study Out of Residence will review your completed petition. Harvard need not approve a college course for credit in order for the course to count toward pre-med requirements or to be recognized by AMCAS and medical schools.

Beware of taking too many of your premeds outside Harvard. Medical schools may have the impression that you are ducking Harvard's science courses, which are generally more challenging and competitive than courses offered through summer schools and extension schools elsewhere. This applies to everyone except post-bacs who decide to apply to medical school after graduation from Harvard (who have no choice but to take their courses at the Extension School or elsewhere).

## What should I concentrate in at Harvard?

In the late 1950's, the most favored pre-medical curriculum by medical schools was one consisting of intensive science courses. Students who were science concentrators regularly did better in admissions than students who were social science or humanities concentrators. This attitude, however, no longer holds true. In 1984, the American Medical College set out new guidelines for the type of pre-medical curriculum medical students should receive.

According to this report, pre-medical students should receive a broad and thorough education. Although science is an essential ingredient in a broad and thorough education, it should not be studied exclusively. Social science and humanities are an equally necessary part of a thorough education, enabling students to "appreciate the many dimensions of human experience" Furthermore, the study of science should not be seen as a way to accumulate a body of information, but rather as becoming familiar with a way of thinking and approaching a problem.

Medical schools are looking for students who have the ability to work on their own and acquire analytical skills. Thus, schools may look for evidence of scholarship requiring originality of thought and research. Also, the ability to write effectively is emphasized.

In short, concentrate and excel in whatever interests you the most. Medical schools increasingly appreciate non-science concentrators because of their unique perspective and value add to the medical school student body. Although you should do well in your pre- medical science courses, you should not feel compelled to become a science major to impress medical school admissions committees. On the other hand, if science is what you love, make sure that you also complement your science studies with humanities and social sciences. You will get plenty of science in medical school!

### **Advance Standing**

Students interested in using AP scores for premedical requirements should contact individual medical schools to clarify policies regarding AP tests (these vary from school to school). Students are strongly encouraged to complete premedical requirements with college courses, as AP classes may be inadequate preparation for the MCAT.

## Non-academic requirements

Extracurricular activities weigh heavily in your application to medical school. Admissions committees consider the way you spend time outside the classroom to be an important reflection of your personality, character, and potential to be a good doctor. It's critical that you keep this in mind as you go through college and that you present your extracurricular activities effectively in your applications. In addition, these activities can be excellent sources of recommendation letters.

It is not our intention to suggest that there is a "right" way of spending your time; Dunster House does not wish to produce "cookie-cutter" applicants. On the other hand, the reality is that admissions committees view some activities as more relevant to a future career in medicine than others. For example, experiences that influence your decision to pursue medicine are very important, since schools want to be sure that you know what you're choosing. Examples include working at or volunteering in a hospital or even just shadowing a doctor occasionally. It means a lot to be able to say, "I know medicine is right for me because I've had these first-hand experiences with it when I..."; this is evidence that you've thought about medicine and have believe that it's right for you. We have been told by several admissions deans that they will not consider applications from students who have no direct exposure to medicine, even if these applicants are qualified in every other way.

Similarly, community service activities that show your interest in actively helping other people are a big plus. In fact, you NEED to have some community service to be a viable med school applicant. Medical schools like people who are willing to "give back" to the community for that is what a responsible physician does in one way or another. Many types of volunteering options exist; some will be more personally significant to you than others. All can be worthwhile and rewarding. On campus, Phillips Brooks House coordinates many volunteer programs and would be a good place to start looking if you want to get involved. Crimson Care Collaborative and Health LEADS are also exciting healthcare volunteer opportunities.

Since medicine is becoming increasingly more of a science and less of an art, it can only help your application to have had scientific experiences, even (or especially) if you're a non-science concentrator. Any experience that makes you more scientifically literate is valuable. For most students, this takes the form of research experience during the summer or on a regular basis during the school year. (Note that this does not necessarily need to be "lab" research; students can also do field research or work on clinical studies.) Results and publications aren't the focus (although these are helpful); the lessons you take away from the experience and your understanding of the Big Picture link between science and medicine are crucial. In many cases, students discover that they enjoy research, and they find themselves including research in their career plans in some form. This is by no means a requirement, however.

Although some pre-meds wrongfully interpret the above paragraph as meaning they need to do lab bench research, this is not at all the case. Medical schools are looking for applicants that advance a field of knowledge in some way. As noted above, while this can take the form of lab research, it can also be anthropologic research, global health research, engineering research, etc.

Other types of activities tend to be judged by committees on an individual basis in a somewhat subjective way. They will look at your role in the activity, how your time was spent there, and what lessons or benefits you derived from your participation. Some examples of activities evaluated according to these criteria are athletics, publications, the arts, conferences, and ethnic organizations.

In general, it is to your advantage to be active and a "leader" in whatever you do. What's key is depth, not breadth; serious commitment over several years to a few activities is more impressive than token participation in a dozen organizations. Showing initiative and the ability to work with others can help you convince a medical school that you're the kind of student for whom they are looking. And remember, don't participate in activities just because you believe it will get you into medical school; it will show. Students who engage in activities they are passionate about, ranging from finance clubs to the Kennedy School, are likely going to be more competitive and interesting applicants than folks who only engage in pre-medical-related activities because they think it will look good on their application but not because of a passion for these activities. You should do what you enjoy doing—that's what you'll do best!

# Rough application timetable

For exact MCAT dates see: <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm>

## **Sophomore/Junior Year**

- Meet with your non-resident premedical advisor at least once per semester.
- Seek out clinical experiences, explore medicine: shadowing, volunteering, research
- Map out a plan to complete required premedical coursework.
- ***Keep your grades up.***
- MCAT option: Summer before junior year.
- Forge strong relationships with future recommenders.

## **T-1 Year**

- Fall: Think critically about the decision to become a doctor. Seek out additional clinical experiences in order to make an informed choice.
- Discuss your career options with both your non-resident advisor and a resident premedical tutor.
- Remember, it is OK to do something else for a few years before applying to medical school. Many students gain valuable experiences and are more mature applicants having explored other interests. Fewer and fewer Dunster applicants are going straight through, and this trend is true nationally.
- **Spring before Application year**
  - March: Spring Premed Meeting for all upcoming applicants. Submit completed House Questionnaire, draft AMCAS application, and draft personal statement to the house committee.
  - April: Receive application feedback. Work to improve your application and finalize your list of schools.
  - MCAT option.
  - Early May: Premedical committee mock interviews. Meet in person to discuss your application.
  - Early June: Submit AMCAS online and May 15 deadline for letters of recommendation to the House!
  - July-August: Receive and submit secondary applications within two weeks of receipt.

## **T-0 Application year**

- September - January: Medical school interviews! Be prompt in scheduling interviews following invitations.
- October - January: Decisions from schools with rolling admissions.
- March: Decisions from schools with fixed date admissions.
- May 15: You can only hold one medical school acceptance after this date.
- May - July: Waitlist movement
- August - September: Start medical school!

# Application Process

## Letters of Recommendation

In addition to the below, please regard the OCS website “Letters of Recommendation” link: <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/letters-recommendation>

The House Committee Letter is a summary document including your high school background, academic and extracurricular performances during College, and excerpts from your recommendations. It is written by the Dunster Premedical Committee and signed by the Dunster Faculty Deans. Dunster House will send the House letter, attached with your medical school recommendation letters, to medical schools. Students select which letters will be sent separately in their packet (between 4 and 6 letters should be selected to go out with the Dean’s Letter). It goes without saying that if you have waived your rights to a letter we cannot tell you what it says.

For each letter of recommendation, fill out a waiver form indicating whether you waive your right to view the letter. Waiver forms are available in the House Office and on the Dunster premed website. We recommended that you waive your right to view your recommendation letters. Letters of recommendation for students who have not waived their rights have the potential to raise questions in the minds of admissions committee members regarding the sincerity of the letter writer and the extent to which the student was involved with the wording of the document. Some Admissions Deans have told us that they do not put much stock in recommendation for students who have not waived their rights because they feel that the writer may not have been totally candid. Furthermore, some recommenders might feel more comfortable writing a recommendation letter if they know that you will not be reading it.

Letters of recommendation are due at the Dunster House Office BY MAY 15<sup>th</sup> of the year in which you are applying.

### **When should I ask for a rec letter?**

You should start asking for recommendation letters as soon as your experience with the recommender is complete. For example, if you would like a letter of recommendation from the professor/TF of a class that you are currently taking, you should ask that person for one upon your completion of the class. Doing so will ensure that their impressions of you are still fresh. Ideally you should be 'collecting' letters of recommendation as you proceed through your undergraduate years. When asking for recommendation letters, it is important to keep in mind that recommenders tend to have very busy schedules and often procrastinate when it comes to writing letters. With each recommender, agree upon an explicit deadline that gives the recommender at least one month to write your letter. It is to your advantage to make sure that this deadline falls no later than the first week of May of the year when you're applying, giving you a margin of safety in the event that your recommendation letter is delayed. If the letter hasn't arrived by the deadline which you agreed upon, don't hesitate to remind politely and tactfully your recommender of the deadline and the importance of the letter. With each letter request, you

should enclose for the benefit of the writer one copy of the waiver form indicating whether you waive your right to view the letter and a stamped envelope.

### **How many letters should I obtain?**

You should obtain as many excellent letters as you can. In general, it is a good idea to have six (6) letters. Ultimately you can choose to include between four and six in your packet. The Dunster House Office or Premedical committee cannot read the letters and cannot tell you which letters to choose. You and your advisors will have to choose your letters without any knowledge of their contents.

### **Whom should I ask for a recommendation letter?**

When considering this question, it is important for you to realize that the Dunster House letter will draw heavily from the contents of the letters that you have selected. The Dunster Premedical Committee will not quote from letters that we do not feel put you in your best light. Given the importance of the recommendation letters, you should not hesitate to ask your potential recommenders whether they feel comfortable writing a strong letter of recommendation for you. Some possible candidate letter-writers are:

- Professors
- Physicians who have known you in a situation other than physician/patient or parent/child Research mentors/supervisors
- Departmental or House tutors
- Volunteer organization leaders, faculty affiliates, or community members
- Employers
- Coaches
- Teaching Fellows

When picking recommendation letter writers, think about your application as a whole—you want your personal statement, primary application, and letters to create a coherent, consistent narrative of why you want to go to medical school. If you emphasize an activity in your application that had a mentor, but you don't receive a letter from that mentor, that may seem suspicious. Furthermore, make sure that each letter will highlight something unique about you—do not pick letter writers who will be very redundant in their comments. Make sure that each letter you decide to include will have some unique value add to your application.

You can help your recommenders by providing them with information about yourself in the form of a cover letter broadly outlining your background and your goals and interests in medicine, a curriculum vitae, and relevant papers, lab reports, and exams where appropriate. A copy of your AMCAS personal statement may also be helpful if you are currently applying when you ask for the recommendation. It is also helpful to provide your recommenders with a list of extracurricular activities that are of importance to you. Finally, it is a good practice to thank your recommenders for their time, either personally or with a brief letter.

The way in which you ask for a recommendation letter is VERY IMPORTANT. We have found

that the following request in person ideally will help secure the strongest letter possible:

**“Would you be willing to write me a *strong* letter of recommendation for medical school?”**

Asking in the above way will give the writer an “opt-out” option if they feel that they do not know you well enough or would be unable to write you a strong letter. Once they agree to write you a letter, be sure to set up a meeting or call with them to discuss more your interest in medical school and to provide them with the above-mentioned materials (cover letter, CV, etc.). The more concrete you can be in your request for a letter (providing examples of your interactions with the mentor and telling them why you hope they will write you a letter), the easier it will be for them to write you a strong letter and the more they will appreciate it. Letter writers do not want to be trying to recall memories or important interactions that you have had with them—if you can refresh their memory and provide them with these examples up front, the easier it will be for them to write a letter.

Finally, it is a good idea to discuss carefully with your advisors how you can best coach letter writers so that they are aware of how the premedical process works and how important a strong letter is. For example, if a humanities professor has limited experience writing a letter of recommendation for a medical applicant, then he or she might simply re-visit your CV, thinking that it’s better to speak to your abilities as a premed. Nothing could be further from the truth as it is actually more important that your recommender comment on your qualities/skills/characteristics in the appropriate context.

**What is the etiquette of securing a recommendation?**

While you have likely had to get recommendation letters before, you may still benefit from a quick review of how best to ask for a recommendation. Almost all of the people you will ask to write a recommendation will have done it many times before and likely will be happy to write on your behalf. In order to obtain the most personalized recommendation possible, you might meet in person with a possible recommender and have a discussion with him or her about your interest in medicine. He or she may be able even to put you in touch with colleagues with interests similar to yours. By having this discussion, you accomplish two things. First, you broaden your possible exposure to medicine and its related fields. Second, you are able to put a face and sincerity to your intentions to pursue medicine. This passion and thoughtfulness will be reflected in your recommender’s comments. On a separate occasion or then, you will remind your recommender of your conversation about your possible pursuit of medicine and ask if he/she can write a strong letter of recommendation for your application to medical school. If you ask outright for a positive letter, then not only will you let your recommender know what you are looking for, but you will also be able to gauge for yourself—from their response—the extent to which they are committed to writing a solid letter for you. Reminding the recommender in your cover letter of exciting research you did in her class, or a revelation you had based on something she wrote, or an enlightening experience you had when working in the clinic, gives your recommender the ammunition she will need to write an informing and stellar recommendation. After the recommender responds, you should agree upon a schedule for getting the recommendation written and submitted to the House office. Thank your recommender and make a note of any additional material your recommender has requested.

## How are letters sent to schools?

Harvard uses the VirtualEvals system. The VirtualEvals system is a secure method in which the House can upload our cover letter in addition to copies of your original letters to the VirtualEvals site. From here, the medical schools can download your entire packet of letters. This system is extremely convenient for medical schools as well as for students as it ensures instant delivery of letters.

The Dunster Premedical Committee edits all letters and submits a final Dunster Committee letter with your other letters into the VirtualEvals system. Letters are uploaded by August 15<sup>th</sup>. This is a university-wide policy and does not delay processing of your application. Medical schools know to expect letters from Harvard then. You should still try to submit your primary AMCAS application in June.

To facilitate this process, it is important to make two decisions as early as possible:

- Which letters you'd like to use to apply to medical school. You should decide this with your advisors (who cannot tell you the content of letters) and then make a final official list of letters to be used.
- Schools to which you'd like to send letters. This information will be asked of you in mid-summer and it's important that in communicating your list to the committee, that you make sure it's well-researched and final. Please make sure to submit your final lists when asked to do so in the process.

To see how to fill out the AMCAS section on letters of evaluation, please go to the OCS website here: <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/amcas>

## SUMMARY AND CHECKLIST FOR RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

1. All letters must be in at the house office by May 15.
2. Minimum of 4 recommendation letters.
3. ASK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER YOUR CLASS/JOB/PROJECT
4. Give each recommender:
  - a. At least 1 month's time (make sure to give yourself a couple of weeks before the May 15 deadline to obtain overdue letters.)
  - b. A cover letter, CV, papers, lab reports, exams, list of extracurriculars, personal essay
  - c. Copy of the waiver form
  - d. Stamped envelope addressed to:

### **DUNSTER HOUSE**

Attn. Diana Hovsepian (E303A)  
945 Memorial Drive Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

5. If letters are late, remind recommenders. Do not be shy about calling them: it's your future!
6. Thank all of your recommenders.

ON DEADLINES: Letters that arrive after May 15 of the summer you are applying may not be included in the application packet. If you want to include a recommendation from a summer experience advisor, such as a lab PI, let us know in advance and we will pull out your application file and hold it until that letter has been received.

## **Selection of Schools**

### **Overview**

In general, a student should apply to 18-25 medical schools. This may seem to be a large number, but given the variations in the process, it is better to over-apply than under-apply. The entire process will cost between \$2,000 and \$5,000 depending on the amount of travel undertaken. You should plan for this expense. In some cases, school fees will be waived for needy students (see AMCAS paragraph later). As the application process continues, and you receive offers for interviews and later for admission, your list of schools will necessarily be reduced as you become more selective in the schools that you pursue through the final interview stage.

To choose a set of schools, you should sign-up for the Medical School Admissions Requirement (MSAR) website on AAMC:

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/applying-medical-school-process/deciding-where-apply/medical-school-admission-requirements/>

This site has a short write-up on each school and important statistics regarding the percentage of applicants interviewed and the percentage of the accepted pool that is in-state and out-of-state. You should pay particular attention to your home state schools, neighbor state agreements, and those schools that accept a reasonable number of out-of- state applicants. You should also pay attention to the application deadlines of the medical schools you are interested in and whether they have rolling admission. Furthermore, most medical schools now have web pages detailing their programs and admissions requirements.

We recommend that students:

- Apply to all home state schools, public or private.
- Apply to other schools up to a total of 18-25 schools.

Consult with your pre-medical adviser regarding your list of schools. To develop a better sense of the relative rankings of medical schools based on a variety of criteria you may find it helpful to consult the US News and World Report's annual 'best graduate schools' issue. These rankings can be found at the USNWR web site. These and other rankings are a rough guide and should not cloud thoughtful consideration of all medical school choices. The US News rankings are largely based on research status, and may not be reflective of the strengths of schools with regards to other important areas, such as serving underprivileged communities, primary care, and global health work.

## **Medical School Criteria: Questions to Ask Yourself**

### **Am I looking for a campus that is urban, suburban, or rural?**

Location of a medical school campus and its associated hospitals is often linked to what types of patients and cases you will eventually see in your clinical years. For instance, you may see more gun shot wounds at an inner-city hospital than at a suburban locale. If this type of experience is important to you, keep it in mind during the application process.

### **Do I value Problem-Based Learning?**

Many medical schools are moving away from the traditional, lecture-based, rote-memorization style of learning and are trying to incorporate "case-based" teaching methods that are more active. In "problem-based" learning (PBL), students meet in groups of 6-10, and with the help of a faculty member facilitator, try to solve medical patient care issues by dissecting a case study. The goal is for students to learn to work together and communicate effectively, integrate various disciplines in their problem-solving approach, identify their own learning agenda, and develop lifelong research skills. Some schools have embraced this approach exclusively, while others have curricula that mix lecture-style with problem-based learning.

### **Am I interested in a research or primary-care-focused institution?**

At large research institutions, emphasis is on research and lower priority may be placed on teaching students. Research schools focus heavily on acute, in-hospital specialties, and tend to have less developed primary care departments. Primary care institutions place their energies in clinical training and are typically strong in generalist fields such as family medicine, general internal medicine, and pediatrics. Keep this in mind as you explore your medical school options.

- Examples of schools with primary care training focus: University of Washington (Seattle), Oregon Health Sciences University, University of Rochester, University of Massachusetts, Thomas Jefferson, University of New Mexico, Dartmouth, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Oregon Health Center

### **What kind of curricular approach am I looking for?**

Medical schools have several ways of organizing the basic science years. Most schools teach the material under the traditional groupings of Anatomy, Biochemistry, etc. However, many schools are now transitioning to an "organ-based" system, where the science material is synthesized and taught as it relates to a particular organ.

While the aforementioned criteria are a good place to start sorting the options, the best way to determine whether a school is "right" for you is to talk to students at these institutions. Surveys of Harvard alumni at these medical schools are available at the Office of Career Services in a series of large binders in the reading room, organized by state.

## **The MCAT**

The Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) is a standardized multiple-choice exam that is required for medical school admissions. The most up-to-date information can be found on the AAMC's website: <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/>

### **When is the next MCAT offered?**

MCAT exam schedule can be found on the AAMC website here:

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/mcat-testing-calendar-score-release-dates/>

### **When should I take the MCAT?**

When you are ready! The most common time to take the MCAT is in August the year before or during J-term / spring break of the year of your application cycle. In other words, if you're applying during your senior year, a good time to take the MCAT would be in August after your sophomore year or during J-term / spring break of your junior year. Taking the MCAT later than May of the year you are applying may put you at a disadvantage. Since medical schools will not process your application without your MCAT scores, your application will be held up for that time, putting you further back on the timetable. Another disadvantage is that you will not have a second chance to take the MCAT if you are not satisfied with your first set of scores and still want to apply during the current application cycle. That said, you should plan on taking the MCAT once: it is a demanding task emotionally and mentally, and you should plan on doing your best the first time. Med schools have access to all your scores, so it is best to be as prepared as possible prior to taking the exam, and to only take it once if possible. While some med schools only consider your best score, others consider all your scores. If you are a few weeks out from the exam and feel unprepared, it is best to re-schedule the exam for a later date rather than taking the exam less than 100% prepared. That said, if you are less than satisfied after receiving your MCAT score, meet with your adviser to discuss a plan to re-take the exam. Plan ahead so that you can do your best within a reasonable timetable!

### **How important are my MCAT scores?**

Almost all medical schools require your MCAT scores. The value placed on these scores differs, however, from one school to the next. The AAMC Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR) provides further information on how individual schools reportedly value the MCAT and on mean scores for their last entering class.

### **How should I prepare for the MCAT?**

Unlike the SAT, the MCAT tests a specific body of information. It thus requires preparation. There are many options available to aid in preparation for the test ranging from course notes to reference texts with practice tests to commercial test preparation courses. The method of preparation you choose will most likely depend on your study habits and preferences. A good place to start is the MCAT materials, which contain specific information on the format and scoring of the test as well as sample questions and practice exams. Information on obtaining the manual can be found at OCS or at the American Association of Medical Colleges website ([www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)). Other sources of information regarding the relative merits of different test preparation strategies are other students who have already taken the MCAT. Some MCAT preparation courses include Kaplan, Princeton Review, and ExamCrackers. The advantage of taking these courses is that they are structured and geared towards the efficient transfer of large amounts of necessary information. These programs may also offer assistance with application preparation. The disadvantage is that the cost tends to be prohibitive. It is a good idea to try to borrow Kaplan or Princeton Review MCAT prep books from other students who have taken

the course as these books have the potential to be extremely helpful for test preparation.

## **The AMCAS application form**

This section is composed of two parts. The first describes the AMCAS application and is designed to give you an idea of what the application is and what you need to do before you actually get the application. The second part addresses specifics of the AMCAS application. Although the AMCAS application comes with an instruction booklet that is rather complete, the second part of this section provides information specific to Harvard students filling out this application.

### **General AMCAS Information**

Medical schools can be divided into schools that use the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) application and those that don't (non-AMCAS schools). AMCAS is a non-profit organization run by AAMC that centralizes the application process. AMCAS schools use the AMCAS application as a common front-end to gather information about applicants such as their home address, grades, test scores, etc. It is designed to save you time by eliminating the need to fill out the same information for each school to which you apply. When you fill out the AMCAS application, you can specify which schools your application will be sent to. Each school will then screen you (generally based on your numbers) and may send you another application (called a secondary) to collect more information about you (as well as more money).

### **Non-AMCAS Applications**

Although most medical schools use the AMCAS system, there remain a few that do not (known as non-AMCAS schools). A list of non-AMCAS schools can be found in the AMCAS application materials. See the next section for more information about applying to non-AMCAS schools. Note that you will need to separately contact these schools for an application. Filling out an AMCAS application will not automatically register you with non-AMCAS schools.

### **Getting the AMCAS application**

It pays to obtain the application as early as possible to begin to work on it. AMCAS offers a PDF worksheet that enables you to draft responses before the application itself is available. The AMCAS application is currently only available on the internet ([www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)). Once you have submitted the application it will take anywhere from two weeks to two months or even longer for AMCAS to process your application.

### **AMCAS Fee-Waiver**

The AMCAS fee is \$300-\$500 depending on how many schools you are applying to. You can request a waiver if you have received significant financial aid at Harvard. The fee waiver program has recently changed and is now following the guidelines for the Pell Federal grant program. Apply for the fee waiver early so that it will not delay the completion of your application. Be forewarned that the waiver is often denied. If you do qualify for an AMCAS waiver, you will be granted fee waivers on most secondary applications for AMCAS member schools and also for non-AMCAS schools. However some schools will require you to fill out additional forms or to document that you are from a disadvantaged background. This fee waiver in some cases may lessen the MCAT fee as well; check the AAMC site for further details. You

can apply for a fee waiver for the MCAT even if your AMCAS fee waiver is denied, and some schools may grant a waiver for your secondaries even if AMCAS denied your application.

### **When to submit the application**

Complete the application in May. Certify the completed application in the first two weeks of June (you will need to wait until you receive Spring grades – the registrar’s office says these are due from professors at the end of May and will be posted on the registrar website during the first week of June). Don’t pay attention to medical schools’ application deadlines. Be early. AAMC will allow you to type your application onto their website beginning in May and allow you to certify on June 1.

Early AMCAS certification means getting early secondaries and early interviews. This is not the case for all schools (e.g. HMS), but for some schools, waiting beyond September to submit a secondary application will make it significantly harder to get an interview.

Before you send in your AMCAS application, you may want to have someone else (such as your non-res premed advisor or a friend) look over your application for typographical errors. Remember to photocopy (or print) it for your records. It will be useful later on as you prepare for your interviews. Also remember to give your non-res premed advisor a copy of your AMCAS application.

### **Transcripts**

Obtain an official transcript from the Registrar for your own records so that you can accurately fill out your grades on the Academic Record Section of the AMCAS application. Before you leave for the summer, remember to have the Registrar forward an official transcript with your Spring semester grades directly to AMCAS so that your application can be completed as soon as possible. If you have taken courses at another college (for example in high school), those courses and grades must also be listed on the Academic Record and you must also request transcripts from those institutions as well. Arrange for transcripts to be sent to non-AMCAS schools as well.

### **Non-AMCAS Applications**

You must contact each non-AMCAS school individually to obtain an application. Although a bit more expensive and time consuming, calling each school will usually enable you to get the application earlier since someone in the admissions office will enter your name and address into the computer directly while you are on the phone. Letters may accumulate in a pile until someone types the information into the computer. You should consult the Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR) for information about fees and other requirements. Most non-AMCAS applications come with a separate instruction booklet to answer your questions.

### **Organization**

Applying to medical school can be organizationally challenging. To avoid frustration in the future and to facilitate your application, it is worthwhile to budget a small amount of time each day or week to make sure your applications are organized and to plan what you need to do in the near future. Invest in some office supplies to enhance your organization. Check your e-mail frequently (you probably do this already) and if there are problems be proactive in doing something about it. If you don’t hear from AMCAS don’t assume everything is okay.

## **Filling out the application**

Required questions on the AMCAS are designated with a "\*". Other questions are optional. Some questions may bring up more questions depending on how you answer (see section on disadvantaged status, below). Below is some specific advice on various sections of the application. The most important question as far as we are concerned is the essay.

All details on how to complete the AMCAS application can be found on the OCS website, here: <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/amcas>

## **Personal Statement**

Tips from OCS on how best to write a personal statement can be found here: <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/personal-statement>

This is the part of the application traditionally viewed as "the essay". Students traditionally regard the essay as one of the most difficult parts of the application. Most students spend approximately 4-5 weeks writing the essay and go through many drafts. Although this may seem like a long time to spend on one essay, be assured that this time is well spent. All the AMCAS schools to which you apply will read your personal statement. The inability to complete the personal statement early often prevents students from sending in their AMCAS application early in the application cycle. Although the personal statement may seem formidable, the time and effort that you spent in carefully filling out your Dunster House Premedical Questionnaire will facilitate the completion of your essay.

Before you begin writing your personal statement, it is worthwhile to consider its purpose and how it is used in the admissions process. In general, the personal statement has three major functions in the admissions process. Not all medical schools will use the personal statement in the following way(s). First, at many medical schools, the personal statement is used along with the GPA and MCAT score in determining whether to offer you an interview. Second, most interviewers will read your personal statement before interviewing you. Thus, the personal statement is important in setting the tone for your interview. It will be your interviewer's first introduction to you. Third, when the admissions committee meets later to review your application, your personal statement may be read again. The personal statement is thus a strategic opportunity for you to present and structure your strengths and interests to the admissions committee. What you write in your essay will influence how the committee perceives you, your accomplishments, your motivations, and your potential. For example, writing in a personal way about the difficulties you had in tutoring a disadvantaged high school student, about how you spent every Saturday morning drilling him/her on the finer points of the SAT, about the rapport you slowly developed with the student, about the elation that you both felt when the student got accepted into college despite the odds will seem more significant than if you just write that you tutored a high school student.

What your personal statement should address.

All personal statements should attempt to answer two main questions. (1) Why is medicine right

for you? Admissions committees are interested in determining your motivation for entering medicine. You should describe the development of your interest in medicine and explain why entering medicine is the right career choice for you. The following questions will get you started. When did you first become interested in medicine? How? Did your interactions with physicians somehow influence you in a meaningful way and cause you to want to pursue medicine? Was there a family illness that prompted you to examine medicine more closely as a potential career? What aspects of medicine appeal to you? In this post-Golden age of medicine, why are you still interested in becoming a doctor? (2) Why are you right for medicine? Admissions committees must review thousands of applications and it can be difficult deciding whom to accept into the next entering class. Needless to say, they will admit those applicants whom they feel have the greatest potential for becoming excellent physicians and who have the most potential to contribute something unique to their medical school classes.

Sometimes it can be difficult to draw out the qualities an applicant possesses from a list of activities. The personal statement gives you a chance to tell admissions committees what your strengths are and what qualities you possess that will make you a fine physician. Avoid generalities unless you back them up with specific examples. Simply stating that you care for people is not enough. Everyone applying to medical school cares for people. You must describe what aspects of your application demonstrate that you are a caring person and explain how your experiences and accomplishments reflect that. By presenting a personal account of your qualities, you can structure how the admissions committee will perceive you as an applicant. However, it is important NOT to write what you think admissions committees want to hear. Applicants who do so are easily recognized by the transparency of their essay.

### The Art of Writing

You may find it difficult to address these two questions in the space allotted. It will take some effort and time to concisely address these questions and weave together the different parts of your application. The following are some suggestions for writing a strong essay:

- Your personal statement should be a formal essay. There should be a clear and logical organization to it. How are you going to relate the different parts of your application together so that it doesn't sound jumbled? How do the different parts relate to one another? How will you transition from one topic to the next?
- Do not write a list essay in which you list your resume in prose form. Select three or four experiences, aspects, or anecdotes about yourself to discuss in an in-depth manner. Attempt to draw from these experiences aspects of yourself that you want to emphasize and that you would like to talk about in your interview. In this way, you can personalize your essay.

Write a tight essay. Because of the enormous number of essays that admissions committees must comb through, many essay readers will only read the first and last lines of each paragraph. This does NOT mean that you should increase the number of paragraphs in your essay, but rather that you should structure the first and last sentences of each paragraph to convey what you are attempting to communicate.

- Attempt to capture the reader's attention and interest at the outset of your essay. You want your essay to be interesting, clear, and concise. It should not be a literary, flowery, incomprehensible mess.
- Try to build a theme into your essay to give it cohesiveness and tightness. This requires some thought and creativity. How can the different aspects of your application

be classified together or related to one another? In the past, students have talked about their interest in medicine as a journey, a conversation, etc. However, do not sacrifice clarity and directness to construct a complicated and incoherent literary work that is marginally related to medicine. Avoid making tenuous connections or your essay will seem contrived. Only use a theme if it can logically and reasonably be integrated into your essay.

- If you have particular strengths or unique aspects about yourself, include them in the essay. You will be more likely to be asked about it in the interview.
- Be positive.
- Have others read your essay: premed advisors, friends, parents, teachers, tutors, etc. Their feedback will help strengthen your essay. Pay attention to their comments as the admissions committee may agree. For example, do you use the word medicine too much? If you are having difficulty getting started and organizing your thoughts, try a narrative format, tracing your interest in medicine as well as your most important activities and accomplishments through time. Then, when you are done, whittle these down to their essence. Organization by time is often the most effective and clearest way to organize an essay.

## **Secondary Applications**

You should expect secondaries to arrive 2-8 weeks after your AMCAS application has been certified by AMCAS. Requirements for secondaries vary greatly. Some require only that you send a check with additional money whereas others require more in-depth essays and even the telephone numbers of your recommenders. You should submit secondaries within 2 weeks of receiving them. If you hold on to a secondary longer than 2 weeks, med schools may interpret that as meaning that you are not particularly interested in their program.

# The Interview

The medical school interview is an essential part of the admissions process. For the medical school, the interview serves four main purposes: information gathering, decision making, verification, and recruitment. Each applicant should make use of the interview visit to learn as much as possible about each school and determine his/her level of compatibility with each medical school. Here are some pointers for prospective interviewees:

## **Scheduling an Interview**

Schools vary as far as flexibility for scheduling interviews. Since the first interview is usually the most difficult, try to schedule your first interview with a school that is not your first choice. Because traveling to interviews can be costly and time-consuming, it is a good idea to try to schedule interviews concurrently in the same geographical region. It is reasonable to call medical schools in an area in which you have already scheduled an interview to schedule their interviews on the same trip. Travel delays are unpredictable and often nerve-wracking, so be sure to give yourself plenty of breathing room when scheduling transportation to interviews. Take into consideration which schools admit students on a rolling basis and which wait until the spring to inform all applicants. At the rolling schools, in particular, it can be in your best interest to complete your application and interview as early as possible.

## **Preparing for the Interview**

The importance of preparing for an interview cannot be overstated. The first step in preparing for the interview is to make an honest assessment of yourself and your motivations for entering medicine. You've already begun this journey by completing your medical school applications and the seemingly endless essays. The better you know yourself, the better you'll come across during the interview. Questions included in the end of this guide can help guide your self-assessment. Next, learn what characteristics are frequently assessed in interviews. Learn as much as you can about the medical profession. Finally, learn details about each institution to which you are applying. Read the catalogues and learn about special characteristics of the school.

One question to be sure to prepare for is "Why school X in particular?" Some interviewers, particularly at schools that are not top tier, are concerned that Harvard students might consider them a safety school. This may or may not be true, but you want to be able to persuade an interviewer that you have legitimate reasons for being interested in their school. In the mock interview, you can test your level of preparation and your responses in situations of simulated pressure. The interview should not be an uninspired series of rehearsed phrases, but preparation should help you come up with succinct, insightful answers. Your peers can be a good source of anecdotal information about schools you are visiting.

In summary: 1. Know yourself 2. Know characteristics frequently assessed at interviews 3. Know about the medical profession 4. Know details about the institution to which you are applying

## **The Interview**

The first impression sets the tone for the interview, and outward appearance forms the basis of your first impression. Look as neat and professional as possible. Suits are the standard attire and

carrying a folder or briefcase can be helpful as some schools distribute a lot of literature.

The second rule is to be one time. Give yourself extra time to reach your interview destination. If you have interviews scheduled closely together, let the first interviewer know so you can reach the following interview on time. Don't let tardiness ruin the mood of an interviewer.

Be sure to make eye contact with the interviewer when you shake hands and as you are talking. Interviewees often overlook small details due to nervousness, but subconscious things such as eye contact and body language speak volumes. Try your best to control your nerves. Speak clearly and not too quickly.

Try to answer each question directly. You should not "noodle" around issues. Focus on the answer. You are going to be asked some tough, unexpected questions. Take these questions in stride. If you cannot come up with an answer immediately, ask for time to think about it. Answering a challenging question after careful consideration beats a sloppy "B.S." answer. Also, be careful not to appear too "slick" or rehearsed in your answers. Be friendly, sincere, and honest.

During the interview, do your best to make the interview a two-way dialogue. Appear interested in what the interviewer has to say. Interviewers will vary in style, ranging from lists of "classic" questions to open-ended conversations about anything. Most often, interviewers will have reviewed your file, but sometimes you may be given a "blind" interview in which the interviewer knows nothing about you. Either way, be prepared to present yourself.

Be enthusiastic when talking about your activities and your interest in medicine and emphasize the strengths in your application. Your preparation should help you talk meaningfully about your activities and experiences. If you have done research, be prepared to explain it clearly and succinctly, and be prepared to explain its relevance to medicine. Know the important points you want your interviewer to walk away with. Take advantage of opportunities to talk about things you want and present a certain facet of yourself. Basically, be active in your interview. In many cases, your interviewer is your representative for the admissions committee. Give him/her the information to help present you in the best light or defend your candidacy. Therefore, if you have any weaknesses, it may be appropriate to address them to the interviewer, so s/he can address them if the issue arises. You may wish to talk these issues over with your advisor first. For example, if extenuating circumstances led to poor academic (or other) performance, present your rationale. Also, if you have participated in an endeavor that does not appear on your application, now is the time to let the committee know. Ideally, you should turn the interviewer into your advocate.

At the end of the interview(s), you'll have a chance to ask questions. This can really stump you at the end of a nerve-wracking session so it's a good idea to have some predetermined but legitimate questions to fall back on. You might ask about features of the school are you particularly interested in or what your interviewer feels are the school's strengths and weaknesses. It's a good idea to brainstorm some questions before you're in the thick of things. If you feel you were treated unfairly during an interview, let your premed tutor know. Many schools have feedback forms in which you can let the admissions office know about your experience. Although it is not common, applicants have occasionally been able to obtain extra

interviews.

Finally, have fun. It's one of the few times in your life when everyone will want to learn more about you. Enjoy the experience as much as possible. Relax, be thoughtful, and be yourself.

### **Characteristics frequently assessed by interviewers:**

1. Communications Skills
2. Maturity
3. Personality
4. Interpersonal Relations
5. Motivations for Medicine
6. Humanistic Concerns
7. Depth and Breadth of Interests and Knowledge
8. Ability to Cope with Stress and Overcome Obstacles
9. Ability to Deal with Medical School Demands
10. Aptitude for Science
11. Evidence of Creativity or Original Thinking

### **A Sampling of Frequently Asked Interview Questions:**

#### **Introductory Questions:**

Tell me about yourself. (The most common interview opener—be ready for this!)

#### **Motivations for Medicine:**

- Why do you want to be a doctor?
- How did your interest in medicine develop?
- Why do you think medicine is the right career for you?
- What do you think are the characteristics of a good physician?
- What clinical experiences have you had?
- What events in your life influenced your decision to become a physician?

#### **Level of Insight into Future and Decision to Enter Medicine (These are not the most fair questions, but answer the best you can.):**

- Where do you think medicine is heading?
- What do you see yourself doing in ten years?
- What specialty are you interested in?
- How do you think personal/family issues will affect your medical career?
- What are some of the biggest problems facing medicine?
- What do you consider some of the most important ethical issues in medicine?
- Where do you think the greatest advances will come in the next decade?

#### **Other Career Options:**

- If you couldn't become a doctor, what would you be?
- Why didn't you apply to graduate school in...? or Why didn't you become a...?

#### **Your College Experience (academics, activities, research):**

- How did you like Harvard?
- Why did you choose your major?
- What was your favorite/least favorite/most important course in college?
- Describe your extracurricular activities.
- What community service work have you done?
- Tell me about your research.

**Medical School-Specific Questions:**

- Why are you interested in this medical school?
- Where else have you applied? Where do you think you have a chance of getting in?
- If you are accepted, will you come here?
- What should we be looking for in an applicant? or Why should we take you?

**Level of Personal Insight (Be careful here! Try to be honest and fair to yourself):**

- What are your strongest and weakest points?
- How would you describe your best friend? How would s/he describe you?
- If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
- Describe your most meaningful/enjoyable/difficult experience.

**Ethical Questions (not always fair, but occasionally asked):**

- What would you do if your friend cheated, fabricated research results, etc.?
- How will you deal with the death of your patient?
- Describe a situation in which your moral/ethical standards were challenged.

**Miscellaneous "Fun" Questions (Don't just say what you think they want to hear):**

- What do you like to do for fun? What hobbies do you have?
- If you had a totally free day, what would you do with the extra 24 hours?
- What is the last book you've read?

**Ending Questions (Be prepared for these):**

- Is there anything else you want me or the admissions committee to know about you?
- Do you have any questions for me (the interviewer)? (ps - your answer is ALWAYS yes)

**MULTIPLE MINI INTERVIEW:**

Multiple Mini Interviews (MMIs) are becoming more common at many medical schools. You can learn more about them here: <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/medical-interview>

# Acceptance Procedures

Medical schools will inform you of their decision to accept, reject, or wait list you anytime between October and September of the following year. Schools with rolling admissions will notify you of your status within 4-6 weeks of your interview, while schools with standard admissions will respond to all applicants between March and April. Waiting for medical school letters can be nerve wracking, and following a few guidelines can help make the process easier. Don't be discouraged by a slew of rejection letters-medical school admissions process is competitive and often capricious. A rejection letter is not a reflection of your potential to become a good doctor.

## Acceptance at medical schools

Congratulations on getting in! Here are a few tips:

- Accept your first school. This provides a backup option until you have heard from all of your schools. You should also think about dropping interviews at schools that rank low on your preference list.
- Check deadlines and deposit requirements.
- Carefully reevaluate everything that you know about the school: its academic program, financial aid, clinical and research opportunities, faculty, students, location, and any other relevant factors. Revisit the school or speak to faculty, students, or alumni if you need more information. This is a big decision that will affect your next four years as well as your professional development.
- Make your decision as rapidly as possible, and try not to hold more than one space at a time. There are many students waiting for your position to open up!
- If you wish to defer for some time, check the school's policy. There is significant variation in deferment flexibility among schools.

## Wait list

- Express your desire to attend the school! Letters or phone calls to your interviewer or admissions committee members may influence your chances of getting off the wait list.
- Keep the medical school updated on new achievements and positive developments in your record.
- Keep in close contact with your advisor as well as the resident premedical advisors. We can sometimes help you off the wait list, but we can't help if you don't tell us your status.

## No acceptances

If a medical school has not accepted you at the end of the year, then reevaluation of your goals is required. Review your options with advisors and family.

- Identify weaknesses that may have contributed to difficulties in the application process. An honest evaluation will help you to correct those gaps.
- You can take time off to strengthen your record. Time is an important factor in your post-baccalaureate planning -- if you plan to reapply the next cycle, you will only have had a few months to build your resume.
- Rethink your decision to attend medical school. Is there another career that you would make you happy? What is the likelihood that you will be accepted after taking time off?

**If you have not received any interviews by early November of the year you are applying, please contact your non-resident and resident advisors.**

# Financing Your Medical Education

The issue of financing your medical education should be considered early in the application process. A medical school education is expensive -- tuition ranges from \$8,000/year (in state) to \$60,000/year (private or out of state). In addition to tuition, other expenses including room and board, books, health insurance, and travel can easily add another \$14,000/year. Most students finance their education with the package offered to them by their medical school financial aid office. This package is usually composed of a combination of federal and private loans, scholarships, and a mandatory family contribution. Financial aid is increasingly hard to obtain because levels of federal funding for scholarships and loan programs have significantly decreased in the past few years. For many students, paying for medical school means accruing a heavy debt on top of their undergraduate financial obligations. For all students, it requires very careful financial planning. Prospective students should be prepared to delay lifestyle "extras" and comforts for several years.

If you have certain specific interests, you may be able to defray part or all of your medical school expenses. MD/PhD programs generally pay your tuition and provide a small stipend besides, in exchange for your doing a PhD, usually in the biomedical sciences. There is a Federally funded program that places medical school graduates in underserved sites (such as Native American reservations, inner cities, etc), in exchange for paying for your medical school (Health Service Corps). Finally, the military may be willing to pay your tuition, either at a military or non-military medical school, in exchange for military service afterwards.

A few schools (e.g., Wash U, Penn, UMich, Duke) have merit-based or other scholarships available; you should inquire at the schools you are applying to. The major source of information and advice on which to base your financial plan should be the medical school itself. Financial aid officers are available to help you with your needs assessment, to explain types of financial aid available at their respective schools, and to help you to anticipate future expenses during medical school and further graduate training. Plan ahead to obtain all financial aid application materials in time to meet the schools' published deadlines—late applicants can miss out on the most advantageous forms of aid. Do not make the common mistake of believing that all medical schools will offer you comparable financial aid awards. Schools vary widely in the availability of scholarship aid, as well as the size and composition of student loan packages. Remember that most medical schools believe that you and your family are primarily responsible for meeting the cost of attendance; your parents will often be required to submit financial information as part of the financial aid application process, and a financial contribution towards your expenses will be expected from them.

The most common form of financial aid available is the student loan. By borrowing now, you are essentially using your future income to pay your present expenses. Other financial aid programs grant you financial assistance today in return for a service obligation after graduation. It is important for you to know the repayment obligations of any aid that you accept. Be sure to explore all options that may be available to you, including resident assistantships, research assistantships, part-time employment, outside scholarships and low- interest loans, family gifts, and thrift.

## **Financial Planning**

Talk with your family before you begin your application process. Many students are understandably concerned about imposing further financial obligations on parents or spouses and may try to work out a long-term, no-interest loan with them. Remember, a \$500 gift of loan from a family member today could represent up to \$1,500 that you will have to pay back with a private loan.

Determine expenses for a year by reviewing medical school catalogues, costs of living in various geographical areas, your personal living habits, marital status, etc.

Investigate sources of financial aid such as state and local social, fraternal, and religious organizations. Research state and county medical societies and veteran's organizations. Also, if you are a racial or ethnic minority student there may be scholarships available to you.

Become fully informed about state and federal scholarships and loan programs.

AAMC's website describes in detail several types of medical school loans: <https://students-residents.aamc.org/financial-aid/>

# Joint Degree Programs

## MD/PhD

MD/PhD programs are training positions at many medical schools that are geared towards individuals who are seriously interested in biomedical research or other PhD programs (ex. anthropology, healthcare economics, etc.). Students who are accepted into these programs generally have done substantial research in college and wish to pursue research at the graduate level in addition to their medical studies. Although each program is different and all are somewhat flexible, generally a student pursuing the MD/PhD degrees completes the first two pre-clinical years of medical school, then goes on to do a PhD, and finally finishes the last two years of medical school. The PhD part of the curriculum can take anywhere from three to eight years, depending on the student, the PhD supervisor, and the program. Thus, while an MD/PhD program offers an unparalleled exposure to research, it is a long and arduous affair and should not be undertaken lightly.

In addition to the education itself, there are several advantages to pursuing the MD/PhD degrees. Generally MD/PhD programs pay for medical school and provide a small stipend in addition. Thus students in MD/PhD programs can avoid the massive debt that burdens many of their classmates. When you interview at an MD/PhD programs or get accepted into one, it is important to verify whether it is a "funded" program, i.e. whether it does in fact provide tuition and financial support to its students. In addition, an MD/PhD degree confers certain prestige and can sometimes facilitate career advancement, especially in academic medicine. When applying for basic research funding, MD's and particularly MD/PhD's have a wider variety of grant options than do individuals with PhD's alone, and may, job for job, be somewhat better paid. Finally, although it is possible to obtain exposure to research by other means, completing a PhD program is still the most intensive and rigorous training in science available. Science and medicine also frequently synergize, and MD/PhD training provides the opportunity to make connections which may not be obvious to those with less extensive education. Clinical training can frequently help in addressing research questions.

MD/PhD programs possess major drawbacks as well. Invariably MD/PhD training positions are much more competitive than MD slots. For example, Harvard Medical School offers approximately 160 medical school acceptances but only about 6-8 funded MD/PhD acceptances per year. Obviously, MD/PhD students spend an inordinate amount of time in school; by the time an MD/PhD graduates from medical school, his/her classmates from the first two years of medical school are senior residents or even fully-trained physicians! This can be a very depressing experience. In addition, to become a practicing scientist running a lab usually itself requires two or more years of postdoctoral training. Thus the training to become fully qualified to do both science and medicine at a professional level could easily take you until your early forties! These two endeavors are also each themselves extremely demanding, full-time occupations. It is for these reasons that many people with and without MD/PhD's feel that it is impossible to do both science and medicine well, and that all MD/PhD's ultimately make the decision to do one or the other (but not both). In addition, opportunities such as post-graduate fellowships exist for MD's to obtain post-graduate training in basic research, without spending the number of years required to obtain a PhD. Indeed, there are many labs that are run by individuals with "only" an MD. You should very carefully consider for yourself why you want

both degrees rather than one or the other. In the end, the decision of whether to apply to an MD/PhD program should be made after extensive thought and consultation with others. You should be aware of some practical issues concerning applying to these programs. While most medical schools consider your application to the MD and the MD/PhD programs separately, some schools will automatically reject you from the MD program if the MD/PhD program decides not to accept you (e.g., Hopkins). You should investigate this carefully at each school you are applying. MD/PhD applications usually contain one or more extra essays. These essays usually ask you to discuss your interest in science and medicine. This is an ideal opportunity to bring to bear both medically relevant and laboratory experiences you may have had. Interviews for MD/PhD positions are more involved than MD interviews, generally consisting of several meetings with different individuals (both practicing physicians and basic scientists). You should be prepared to talk about any research you may have done. If you are not accepted at any MD/PhD programs but are still interested in pursuing this curriculum, many medical schools accept a second crop into the joint degree program after the first or second year of medical school. You should investigate this possibility at schools where you are accepted into the MD program only.

### **MD/MPH**

Medical students with particular interests in public health or clinical research sometimes pursue additional training in the form of a Masters in Public Health. Typically one applies for the additional degree once already enrolled in medical school. Depending on the program, the MPH curriculum adds 1-2 years to medical school. This option tends to vary in popularity depending on the strength of the affiliated public health school; you may wish to inquire further when you interview.

### **MD/MBA**

Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic surge in interest for MD/MBA degrees and a vast array of schools. Although the program structure varies considerably, most are five-year programs with three medical years followed by one business year and a semester at each school during the fifth year. Applicants must be accepted into both schools independently and therefore must take the premed course requirements and both the MCAT and GMAT standardized exams. In most cases, students apply to business school after completing their first year of medical school. In fact, we recommend that students unsure about whether or not to apply to an MD/MBA wait until their first-year in medical school to apply to business school. Such an approach allows the student more time to better assess their career goals, increases their likelihood of acceptance to the business school (since acceptance to med school is a boost to any business school application), and reduces the number of business school applications they must complete.

# Taking a Gap Between College and Med School

So you're thinking of taking time off before medical school? There are two routes: a) apply first and then defer your matriculation, or b) take a year (or more) off, during which time you apply.

## **Making the Decision**

Increasingly, Harvard students take time between college and medical school. These so-called “non-traditional” applicants are becoming more of the norm. If you are set on med school and can't see yourself doing anything else, then the right option may be to apply straight through. However, if you have other passions that you want to explore, such as certain employment opportunities, fellowships, etc., you should seriously consider taking time between college and medical school. These experiences can often strengthen your application and distinguish you from the rest of the applicant pool. If you do take time between college and med school, just make sure that you can justify your decision to medical schools—make sure that you can fit the schooling gap into your overall “narrative.” Taking time between college and med school will disadvantage you if you do not do something meaningful or productive.

We recommend that you take time off if it's the right step for you, whether to explore research interest, gain more clinical exposure, or evaluate whether medicine is your true calling. It's also a great way to diversify your interests or to devote your time to an activity other than medicine. Once you matriculate to med school, it will be difficult to find time to be able to devote to non-clinical passions, and the time between college and medical school may be a great opportunity to do so. At the same time, you need to be realistic if you plan to apply during your year off—not all employers will be equally happy about hiring someone who will be taking a lot of vacation days to interview for medical schools. The advantage of applying and then deferring is that you have a lot more flexibility in what you do during your year off, whether it be teaching English in a foreign country, traveling the world, running a non-profit organization, or pursuing artistic interests. If, on the other hand, you are afraid your application is weak, and would like time to improve your record, you may want to ask your advisors to realistically evaluate your chances of being admitted to medical school. And you should start thinking about what you will do after graduation. From another perspective, by the time medical schools begin interviewing, you will be in the midst of fall quarter of your senior year. So as long as you feel your application is strong enough to get you an interview, you can always send the school more information later (e.g., if you just absolutely want your summer job experience to be a part of your application). Ultimately, the decision to take time off is a personal one, but we hope you will talk it over with your friends, parents, mentors, and/or advisors.

## **Logistical Issues**

If you do decide to take time off, it is absolutely critical that you let the premedical committee know. Making sure that all of your letters of recommendation are in your file will save you (and us) a lot of headaches later on! This is especially crucial if you will be working in a foreign country or traveling during your year off. In addition, you will need to coordinate carefully with your premedical advisor so that your House letter is sent out on time when you apply. Warning: your packet of recommendations cannot be sent out without a cover letter from Dunster House!! So let your advisor know where to contact you! In addition, you will need to inform the House office when you need letters to be forwarded to various medical schools.

### **Options for Taking Gap Years**

We hope that you will seek out experiences that will be enjoyable, rewarding, conducive to personal growth, and clearly presentable to medical schools as assets on your application. You don't necessarily need to find a medicine-related opportunity; nevertheless, clinical experiences can be very beneficial if you haven't had much exposure to the field. You may find that talking over the options with your premedical advisor is potentially quite helpful.