Planning for Medical School

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Here to help you get ahead.

Approximately 5 % of graduating Southwestern University students enter medical school each year immediately upon graduation. About 25-35 % of SU graduates each year enter some kind of continuing education program. Obviously SU students are well-qualified for graduate and professional school. Nevertheless, the first questions a student must answer are:

Do I really want to be a doctor?

What's not to like about a career in medicine? Medicine has prestige, helps people, makes good money and is a known quantity – after all, everyone has been to a doctor. Many students begin college interested in medical careers, but over time and with more exploration, many find other fields which interest them more. Career Services and SU faculty can advise you realistically on whether your credentials show promise for admission to medical school, but only you can decide if that is what you really want to do. Gaining exposure to the health field is crucial for your own decision-making and also shows your commitment to prospective medical schools. Volunteering at local hospitals or clinics, reading information about professional schools and medicine as a career, joining one of the campus pre-health organizations, talking with or job-shadowing healthcare professionals and even earning a certification to work part-time in the healthcare (e.g. emergency medical technician, certified nurse's assistant, pharmacy technician, etc.) are all great ways to explore medicine.

MD or DO?

Before you apply to medical school you should know that there are two types of medical training: Allopathic and Osteopathic. Allopathic medical schools are the traditional medical schools that confer MD degrees. Osteopathic schools confer DO degrees. They are very similar except that Osteopathic schools have additional courses in Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment (OMT). OMTs are manipulative techniques to help heal, relieve pain, and restore range of motion. There are approximately 63,000 DOs in the U.S., about 60% in primary care and the rest in a range of other specialties. The remainder of this handout focuses on the MD. To learn more about the differences between an MD and DO see www.princetonreview.com/medical/osteopathic-medicine.aspx. To find out more about Osteopathic Medicine go to www.aacom.org.

What are medical schools looking for?

About 19,517 students nationwide entered medical school in 2012 (according to the Association of American Medical Colleges), 1,572 of whom were in Texas (according to the Texas Medical & Dental Schools Application Service). The average statistical profile of a student accepted into medical school in 2012 was:

- 3.54 GPA (3.44 science GPA) – nationwide; 3.65 GPA – Texas
- 31.2 total MCAT score (9.8 verbal reasoning, 10.5 physical sciences, 10.9 biological sciences, Q writing sample) – nationwide; 30 total MCAT score (9.5 verbal reasoning, 10.2 physical sciences, 10.6 biological sciences) – Texas

Admission to medical school is extremely competitive. Schools will examine your grade point average for both science and non-science courses. These grades and standardized test scores on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) are generally the criteria used to make initial selections from the applicant pool, so it is important to develop good study habits in your first year.

In addition to strong numbers, medical schools seek well-rounded applicants with diverse out-of-class experiences, including healthcare- and science-related activities. The essays you write as part of your medical school application, along with supportive letters of recommendation from faculty, will document these experiences. For more information, see our "Applying to Medical School" handout.

Once you move from "applicant" to "interviewee," your selection is based on overall characteristics including motivation, experience, and communication skills. You need solid interviewing and communication skills. See our "Interviewing for Medical School" handout and schedule a practice medical school interview with a career advisor for more help in this area.

What type of major looks best?

Many applicants believe that medical schools want science majors or that certain programs prefer liberal arts majors. In actuality, medical schools have no preference for what your major is as long as you do well and meet the basic entrance requirements. In Texas about half of applicants are non-science majors (of which psychology is the most common major). We suggest that you choose the major that most interests you for several reasons: First, you are more likely to do well and actually finish the degree in a field of your interest. Second, exploring more broadly provides good insurance if you should happen to change directions or postpone entry. If your chosen major does not include the prerequisite courses for medical school in its curriculum, you must complete them either as science credit hours or elective credit hours. Since many science courses build upon each other, introductory biology and general chemistry are good courses to complete during your first year in order to get through the curriculum in a timely manner. However, be careful and do not overextend yourself, especially if your high school preparation is not as strong as it could be.

What courses are required for medical school?

The minimum entrance requirements for medical school in Texas are as follows, each of which must be completed with a grade of "C" or better:

- 2 semesters of English
- 1 semester of Statistics or Calculus (some schools require statistics, others require statistics OR calculus)
- 2 semesters of Introductory Biology with lab and 2 semesters of Upper-Level Biology
- 2 semesters of General Chemistry with lab and 2 semesters of Organic Chemistry with lab
- 2 semesters of Physics with lab (at SU, calculus is a pre-requisite for taking physics)
- 1 semester of Biochemistry (required for UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, Texas A&M Health Science Center and Texas Tech, recommended elsewhere)

Some medical schools also require additional courses in calculus, comparative morphology, and quantitative analysis; others do not accept AP credits for prerequisite course work. Beginning for 2015 MCAT takers, behavioral sciences questions will also be included in the exam. Although medical schools may not currently require these courses, they may be helpful in preparing for the MCAT. Always check with the medical schools in which you are interested early in your undergraduate career for exact entrance requirements.

What is the MCAT and when should I take it?

The MCAT (Medical College Admission Test) is a standardized, computerized examination designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, and writing skills in addition to the examinee's knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine. The test will undergo a significant revision in 2015 with an increased focus on social and behavioral sciences, so students just starting their undergraduate experience should prepare accordingly. Currently, scores are reported in each of the following areas: Verbal Reasoning, Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences and Writing Sample. The latest you should plan to take these tests is in the spring of your junior year of college, so that you can apply (and interview) early. You will need to have taken the requisite pre-med coursework by the time you take the MCAT in order to do well on the exam. Most students also take some kind of prep class from a test-prep provider. ***Never take the actual MCAT for practice***. For further information about the MCAT, see the Pre-Medical Resources section below.

What timeline should I be following?

First-Year: Depending on your high school preparation, begin the academic requirements for med school your first semester. In the best-case scenario, you would start with introductory biology, calculus or statistics and general chemistry. Make an appointment with Dr. Kerry Bruns, SU's official pre-med advisor, to introduce yourself. Also communicate with your academic advisor and/or Career Services to get advice. Get your feet on the ground solidly in terms of your academics and then begin investigating out-of-class experiences to round out your overall educational process.

Sophomore: Continue building a solid academic record. Acquire out-of-class experience in volunteer, leadership, research and clinical settings. Review your progress with your advisors to make sure you are staying on track.

Junior: In addition to your academics and out-of-class pursuits, during your junior year you will typically apply to medical school, including soliciting letters of recommendation, writing your personal statement, preparing for and taking the MCAT and applying at the earliest possible opportunity (usually between May-June of your junior year). See our "Applying to Medical School" handout for more details.

Senior: Your application will typically be completed by the start of senior year, or at least early in the fall semester. In the fall you will be interviewing and awaiting responses in the spring. Do a practice interview with Career Services before your actual interviews begin. See our "Interviewing for Medical School" handout for more details. Continuing to do well in your courses and building on your out-of-class experiences is crucial, especially if you end up waiting to apply or reapplying.

For a more detailed timeline, visit: https://www.aamc.org/students/download/175214/data/timeline.pdf

How fast can I get into medical school?

Of all those accepted to medical school, at least 98% will have attained a bachelor's degree before they enter. While a bachelor's degree is technically not required to apply to medical school, the disadvantages of not earning a bachelor's degree are that you miss out on the best parts of college (the social interactions and unrelated courses that provide depth and lifelong memories) and, again, you have no insurance should something go awry. It is rare that a student will have competitive enough grades, MCAT scores, extracurricular activities, and maturity to be admitted to medical school with only 90 credit hours and to dental school with only 60 credit hours. We **strongly** recommend that you take your time. Go slowly and strive for good grades and for becoming a well-rounded and well-educated individual. Medical and dental schools give much more credibility to this type of record.

How fast can I get out of medical school?

Medical schools require four years of study. The first two years are spent in concentrated learning of anatomy and basic sciences (unless you attend Baylor College of Medicine, which has condensed the classroom experience to 18 months). The third and fourth years incorporate clinical rotations and patient care. Afterwards, depending on your specialization, you could be in residency an additional three to seven years. Take it one step at a time.

What can I do now?

Learn as much as you can about medicine and other health-related fields by reading, watching public-TV specials, and interviewing and shadowing doctors. Volunteer weekends or apply to work next summer in a hospital or clinic. Develop your study habits and increase your reading efficiency. Be active in pre-health profession clubs. Attend workshops offered on-campus. Get to know the pre-med advisor and be proactive to ask what next steps you can be working on. Keep good records of your experiences to make it easier to relate them on applications in the future.

Pre-Medical Resources

SU Pre-Med Advisor Dr. Kerry Bruns, brunsk@southwestern.edu, in the chemistry department is the main pre-med advisor on campus and chair of the campus Pre-Med Committee, which writes letters of recommendation for students.

Career Services also provides general pre-med advising, reviews resumes, applications and essays and offers practice medical school interviews. Periodically we provide access to healthcare professionals via on-campus events and off-campus job shadowing so that you can explore career options.

Beta Beta Beta is the campus honor and professional society for students of biological sciences, which sponsors various pre-med-related events. Other resources include:

- Association of American Medical Colleges: http://www.aamc.org/
- American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine: www.aacom.org
- AAMC's Aspiring Docs: www.aamc.org/students/aspiring/
- The Student Doctor Network: www.studentdoctor.net
- Official MCAT Website: www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm
- Princeton Review's Med Schools & Careers: http://www.princetonreview.com/medical-school.aspx
- Kaplan's MCAT Preparation: http://www.kaptest.com/MCAT/Home/index.html