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The Medical School Application Process—A Marathon Not a Sprint OCS Workshop, November 14, 2018

1. Timing

- Are you ready?
- When will you be the best applicant?
- Do you want to go straight through or take one or more gap years?
- Do you have a plan for the costs of the application process? We will discuss more about this later, but you may be eligible for the AAMC Fee Assistance Program (FAP), and you can also consult with your Harvard Financial Aid Officer, discuss with your family, and make a budget for the application year.
- There are as many paths to medical school and to being a “great” applicant as there are people in this room.
- However, there are certain combinations of experiences and achievements that medical schools tend to look for in terms of MCAT scores, GPA, clinical exposure, volunteer experience, leadership, and intellectual curiosity as manifested by research interests or other intellectual pursuits.
- Applicants are accepted with a wide range of metrics and different combinations of these attributes, but sizing up where you are now versus where you will be in a couple of years may help you answer this timing question for yourself.
- Would you benefit from post-bac enhancement of your GPA? [Post bac information](#)
- Do not apply to medical school at a time when you have had no clinical experience of any type. Shadowing alone is not sufficient. You need to have had some direct experience with people in need and in a healthcare or similar setting.
- In general, while many medical schools grant deferrals for a variety of reasons, they are not automatic and the willingness to give them varies from school to school. In general, medical schools expect you to apply in the cycle you plan to matriculate.
- A discussion of the decision about when to apply is a great topic for a meeting with one of your House premed tutors. Your tutors can also refer you to the OCS premed advisers for more feedback on whether you are ready to apply or not, or to discuss and weigh the pros and cons of applying in the upcoming cycle or waiting another year or more.

2. **Cleaning up your online presence**

- The time is now.
- Google yourself to see what appears.
- Take stock of your presence on social media. If there is something there that you would not like a medical school to see, remove it and review your privacy settings to manage future content.
- According to Scott M. Rodgers, M.D., former Associate Dean for Medical Student Affairs at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, “Every student should assume that admissions committees DO look up applicants online and sometimes come across information about people that can either hurt or help a candidate.” (www.aamc.org)
- Barbara Fuller, M.P.H., former Director of Admissions at The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University agrees. “Students on the admissions committee are more tech savvy and actually have been responsible for presenting information on candidates—acquired through internet searches—that changed an acceptance to a rejection. As an applicant, you are responsible for the ‘public face’ that the connected world sees,” Fuller says. (www.aamc.org)

3. **Resources for the process:**

a. **Your House:**

- Your House premed tutors and Premed Committee. The resident premed tutors make up a majority of the members of your House’s Premed Committee. They are themselves medical students and residents, and in some cases attending physicians, and they are an invaluable, crucial, and indispensable resource as you go through the application process. They will want to get to know you, if they do not already know you well, and will work with you at every stage of the process. You do not need to know every resident premed tutor in your House, or know them all equally well, but it is important that you do your part to help your Premed Committee get to know you so that they can advise and support you at every step of the application process.
- Resident and non-resident (NRT) premed tutors: Every applicant will be assigned to one premed tutor, usually an NRT, for the duration of the application process. In some cases, your House may have made an early NRT assignment (even as early as Sophomore year), but in most Houses, the NRT will be assigned to you when you declare to your Premed Committee that you intend to apply in the upcoming cycle.

Some applicants may be assigned to one of the resident premed tutors as their application adviser.

- Your assigned NRT (or for a few of you, resident premed tutor) is your primary resource for advice and feedback on the following topics:
 - Readiness to apply and timing of your application: with input from the resident premed tutors, your NRT can help you assess if you are ready to apply. They do so based on in-person or phone/Skype meetings, and they will carefully read and review all of the required application materials you submit to them/your House, including:
 - The “House Questionnaire”/”Personal Information Form” (PIF)
 - Your transcript and MCAT scores (when reported)
 - Your Personal Statement drafts
 - Your School List
 - Your Letters of Recommendation
- Non-local alumni applicants work remotely with their assigned House advisers via email, phone, and Skype.
- Together with your Resident and Faculty Deans, your premed tutors will create your Harvard committee letter (also referred to as the “house letter” and sometimes as the “dean’s letter”), which gives a huge boost to your application. Follow your Committee’s and tutors’ instructions, requests, and advice carefully.
- The Academic Coordinator in your Allston Burr Resident Dean’s office: the Academic Coordinators are key support staff for help with many important components of the medical school application process, including collecting recommendation letters to be sent to medical schools. Be sure to familiarize yourself with their role and how they support the medical school applicants in the House.

b. The OCS Premed Advisers

- The primary way in which the OCS premed advisers support you as you set out to apply to medical school is through 1) our workshop series for applicants (of which this workshop forms the introduction); 2) the resources on our website collected under the “[Applying to Medical School](#)” tab; 3) our Q/A Webinars for Current Applicants offered every week from early May to mid-June; and 4) our [OCS Medical School Applicant Listserv](#) (please subscribe using a harvard.edu address (@college, @post, or @alumni.harvard.edu)).
- Many of you will go through the entire process without meeting individually with the OCS premed advisers. Your House premed

advisers serve as your main support and point persons for questions and concerns related to preparing and submitting your application, and it is perfectly fine for you to interact primarily with members of your House premed team as you prepare and submit your applications. All of the resident premed tutors communicate and meet regularly with the OCS premed advisers, and will refer prospective and current med school applicants from their House to us for additional advice and input as needed.

- Some of you may feel that you have questions or concerns that require additional attention by the OCS premed advisers, to complement the advice you are receiving from your House tutors. In order for the two OCS premed advisers to serve equitably the ~260-300 students and alumni/ae who apply to medical school from Harvard every year, we offer a maximum of two individual 30-minute advising appointments for applicants in the upcoming cycle between February and June 15 of the spring in which you get ready to apply.
- Once you have started meeting with Oona or Emiko, please continue to meet with the same adviser for future appointments.
- Given the large number of applicants, the OCS premed advisers cannot give individual feedback on Personal Statement or secondary application essay drafts, or on the AMCAS Activities section. See our AMCAS FAQs and workshop resources for these topics on our website.
- If your assigned House tutor is not available or has not responded to your inquiries, please let one of the resident premed tutors in your House know that you have not been able to connect with your NRT/assigned adviser before you reach out to the OCS premed advisers.
- Applicants with special concerns or circumstances may benefit from meeting with one of the OCS premed advisers early (by the end of the fall term or early in the spring term), and, after consulting with us, may be advised to meet individually with one of us more frequently than two times throughout the spring term leading up to applying. To this end, it is crucial that you let us know if you have had an institutional action, have a lower GPA (overall GPA below ~3.3/BCPM GPA below ~3.4-3.5) or lower MCAT (below 509 or with a low individual section score), have not had any or very little clinical experiences, are applying internationally, are an international applicant, or if you have any unusual or difficult circumstances. Re-applicants who were not accepted in a previous cycle are also encouraged to work closely with the OCS premed advisers as well as with House premed tutors.

- As mentioned above, consult the OCS website for all application-related topics that you have questions about, and be sure to do so before you schedule an appointment to meet with one of the OCS premed advisers. There is a wealth of information about the application process on our website, including resources for each of the OCS workshops for applicants.
 - *Medical School Admissions Data* report for Harvard College students and alumni. This book is produced annually and contains data about medical school admissions that is specific to Harvard applicants. You can get one from one from the OCS front desk. It is a valuable resource for figuring out how you as a Harvard applicant fit into the process.
 - Juniors and Seniors: Be sure to review OCS communications (“This Week at OCS” and the curated OCS Premed and Pre-Health Newsletters and event spotlights) for workshops and other events directed at students preparing to apply to medical or another health professions school within the next several application cycles.
 - Alumni: Be sure to subscribe to the [OCS Medical School Applicant Listserv](#) to stay up to date about workshops and other events directed at alumni preparing to apply to medical or another health professions school within the next several application cycles.
 - All OCS workshops and events of interest to current and future applicants can also be found in the OCS events calendars. <https://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/events>
- c. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Resources**
- MSAR (Medical School Admission Requirements for U.S. and Canadian Medical Schools). Access to MSAR can be purchased at AAMC.org for \$28 and is essential. (See the [MSAR home page](#) for a link to purchase and to access [MSAR](#))
 - The Association of American Medical Colleges is the group that administers the MCAT and the AMCAS application. You should make sure you are familiar with their website. (aamc.org)

4. Budgeting for the process

- The AAMC administers the Fee Assistance Program (FAP), which provides financial relief for the MCAT and the AMCAS application (up to 15 schools) and provides free access to the MSAR and other reference materials. [FAP](#)
- The application fees are as follows: \$170 AMCAS processing fee which includes one school; \$39 for each additional school; and secondary

application fees of \$25 to \$150 per school. An applicant who applies to 20 schools and receives 20 secondary applications averaging \$75 a piece will have costs of close to \$3000 for the application process alone. Harvard Senior applicants apply to an average of 23-24 schools, and Alumni applicants to an average of 27-28 schools.

- Interview travel costs will be on top of this and are widely variable.
- The Harvard Financial Aid Office may be able to help Senior applicants if you are currently on financial aid at the college.
- Rarely, medical schools will help defer expenses, but you have to demonstrate significant need.

5. Components of the application process

- Transcripts
- MCAT scores
- Letters of recommendation
- Committee (House) letter
- School selection
- AMCAS application
- Beyond AMCAS: TMDSAS for Texas schools; AACOMAS for D.O. schools; Canadian applicants to Ontario schools use OMSAS; Applications to European schools
- Secondary applications
- Interviews
- Post-acceptance timeline and other issues

6. Transcripts

- The details of how to request your transcripts in the AMCAS application, in order to transmit all required transcripts to AMCAS, are covered in the AMCAS workshop that will take place in the spring. You can also find instructions for this in the [AMCAS Instruction Manual](#).
- Filling out the application is complicated and requires considerable attention to detail. You can review [AMCAS information on our website](#).
- As an overview, here are a few things to keep in mind: You have to submit a transcript for every U.S accredited college or university where you have ever taken even one course, even if you withdrew or received no credit. This includes courses you might have taken at a college while you were still in high school.
- On the AMCAS application, you will enter your courses exactly as they appear on your transcript and AMCAS will use the transcripts you send to verify this information. If you are a current student you can view a copy of

your unofficial transcript in my.harvard. Alumni can download an unofficial transcript on the FAS Registrar's website at <https://registrar.fas.harvard.edu/transcript/order-transcript> (click on the "Grades" tab on the left).

- If you are enrolled in college courses at Harvard or elsewhere in the spring before you apply, you should wait until your spring grades are final before requesting that the transcript be sent.
- Your science, or "BCPM", GPA is composed of all grades you have received in biology, chemistry, physics, math, and statistics courses. It is the content of the course, not the title that matters. We are happy to offer guidance, but having taken the course, you are the best judge. The AMCAS manual provides instructions for how to classify your courses as well as other aspects of filling out the application. [AMCAS Instruction Manual](#)

7. MCAT score

- When you sign up for the MCAT, be sure that the name you use to register is an exact match to the name on the ID that you will use to gain admittance to the test. People will be turned away if the names do not match, even for something as minor as hyphens in one and not the other spelling of your name. Use your official name for everything. It can cause delays and worse if the name on your transcript is different from the name you use in AMCAS or give your House for use in your letter.
- The biggest question for most students is when to take the test.
- The short answer is that you need to take it when you have finished the majority of the relevant course work, have time to study and are reasonably sure you will be in a position to give it your best shot.
- Most applicants will be advised to take it by April of the spring in which they plan to apply. While we strongly recommend that you only plan to take it once, taking it by April gives candidates a chance to retake the exam if things do not go well the first time.
- Taking it in May of the year you apply makes it more challenging to retake it, but you will still get your score in time to pull out of the cycle if you are not satisfied with the score.
- There are successful candidates every year who take the exam for the first time in June as they are applying. This makes it hard to retake the exam, can prolong the process of choosing schools and can delay the application process. However, if April comes and you are not doing well on the practice exams, it is better to delay the test than to do poorly.

8. Letters of recommendation

- Letters of recommendation should be sent to your House, where they become part of your file. You need to send a waiver form to each of the people who will be writing a letter on your behalf, and that form needs to be submitted to the House along with the letter by your recommender.
- You can have any number of letters sent to your House. In the end, most applicants send 4 to 5 letters to the medical schools. MD/PhD candidates send more.
- The strongest letters come from people who know you well. Letters from teaching fellows do not need to be co-signed by professors. If you have been in a lab or another job for a significant period of time, schools will expect to see a letter from the supervisor of that work.
- Your House tutors and OCS advisers can help you figure out whom you should ask to write your letters of recommendation if you are confused about this.
- Aim to have your letters in by late spring of the year in which you are applying. Be sure to check the deadline at your House regarding the submission of letters.
- Stay in touch with your letter writers. Thank them. Let them know the outcome of your process.
- You will need at least one letter from a science professor or a science course teaching fellow. A few schools ask for two, but your PI or research mentor can count for the second one if you have done research in a scientific or medical field.
- [Information about letters of recommendation on our website](#)

9. The Committee (House) Letter

- Each House will have clear deadlines and expectations regarding the premed process, but those deadlines and expectations will vary somewhat from House to House.
- For students who adhere to the deadlines, the Committee letter along with the individual letters to be sent to schools will be uploaded to VirtualEvals by August 15.
- This August 15 letter submission deadline has been the rule at Harvard for a long time and our applicants do extremely well in the application process. Medical schools know that Harvard letters arrive by August 15. Almost all schools will send secondary applications without these letters and some will send interview invitations without first reviewing the letters. It is rare, however, for interview invitations to be sent before the middle of August.

- Remember that while your House premed tutors are there to help you and support you, they are also writing and signing your Committee letter. Be professional. Be on time. Be polite. Be grateful.

10. School selection

- This is a complicated and individual process.
- Resources for this include most of the resources listed above. The MSAR will be invaluable. You should also use the chart of requirements, financial aid policy, and other admissions information on our website at <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/premed-academic-requirements> (click on the “Requirements, Admissions, and Financial Aid Policies” tab, where you will find two spreadsheets which you can download and save).
- There are many factors to consider, including location; your state of residency; in-state versus out-of-state acceptance rates; type of curriculum; type of grading; research opportunities and funding; clinical resources; special programs or overall feel of the school; rolling admissions; the presence or absence of merit scholarships; and more.
- It is crucial that you review your list with your assigned House adviser (NRT or resident premed tutor). A list that is too short or not a good fit for the candidate can result in getting no admissions. If you are uncertain about this or if you have a lower GPA or MCAT as discussed above, the premedical advisers at OCS are also happy to review your list.

11. AMCAS application

- This is a complicated application and this subject is covered in detail in the OCS [AMCAS workshop](#) in the spring. If you are applying this year, you should attend this workshop. The AMCAS workshop will be offered both on campus and virtually.
- Do not look to the official deadlines for AMCAS submission as a guideline to when to submit yours. Your application needs to be in much earlier than that. Late applications are one of the common reasons for receiving few or late interviews and no offers of admission.
- Try to work on many drafts of your personal statement in March and April so that you have a solid, nearly final draft that several people have read going into May (be sure to get feedback from your assigned House tutor on your draft). OCS will hold a personal statement and other application essay writing workshop in the spring (the OCS premed advisers cannot give individual feedback on your personal statement drafts). In general

you are trying to hit many singles with your personal statement rather than focusing on hitting a home run. Memorable personal statements can be great. Risky ones are not so great. Listen to advice when your House tutor/s tell you that something seems off. It will hit some medical school admissions committee members the same way.

- The AMCAS application opens in early May, at which time you can begin working on it.
- AMCAS opens for submission in early June. You do not have to submit on the first day, but you should aim to have your application in by mid-June in order to give yourself the best shot at receiving interview invitations and acceptances.
- Your application needs to be 100% error free. If you need a few days to carefully proofread and ensure it is error free, then it is always going to be worth waiting those few days.
- Your application will typically be verified anywhere from 3 to 6 weeks after you submit it. At that point it is officially released to schools. AMCAS begins transmitting verified applications in late June.

12. Secondary applications

- Your assigned House application adviser is your primary point person for questions about and feedback on your secondary application essays. The OCS advisers are not able to offer individual feedback on your secondary application essays.
- Be sure to review the resources for secondary application essay writing on the OCS website at <https://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/personal-statement>.
- Some schools screen AMCAS applications prior to sending secondary applications but most do not.
- Secondary applications will begin coming as soon as your AMCAS application is verified and sent to schools. A few may come even earlier.
- Some schools post them on their websites/in their applicant portal, so check for that as well.
- You should make sure you set aside time to do these applications promptly and efficiently in the summer. Ideally, plan to turn each one around within ten days. They pile up otherwise!
- Again, error-free documents are crucial.
- You need to be able to check your email virtually every day in the summer. Check your spam folder every day. Make sure you use an email for your application that you will actually look at every day.

13. Interviews

- Your House Premed Committee will conduct mock interviews for current applicants. Be sure you know the process for scheduling yours, as mock practices vary from House to House.
- OCS offers multiple medical school interview workshops in the late summer and fall, which cover the details related to interviewing and includes one mock Multiple Mini Interview (MMI) station. We will just focus here on timing.
- If you submit your applications early, you could receive interview invitations as early as August and could receive them as late as February or even later for some schools. The majority of invitations come in between late September and early January.
- If you are planning on living outside of the U.S. during the fall, talk to us about strategies for making the interview process work. It can be very challenging and expensive if you are applying while in Asia, Africa, Australia or remote areas.
- Get in touch with your House Premed Committee and tutors if you have no interview invitations by late October or early November.
- The Canadian timeline is different and is very specific. There is more information about the Canadian application process on our website at [Applying to Canadian Schools](#).

14. The post-acceptance world

- Applicants can get an acceptance anytime from October 15 up to the week before matriculation.
- Some schools have rolling admission and some do not. There is no published list of which schools are rolling and which are non-rolling. You should read the instructions from each school to which you are applying carefully, so that you understand what is expected of you as the application cycle progresses.
- If you are fortunate to receive an early acceptance in the fall, you may consider withdrawing from some schools that are lower down your list and therefore save you time and money on interviews.
- When you receive an offer of admission, you are asked to accept it. Sometimes you are asked to send a deposit. This does not mean you are promising to go to that school and the deposits are refundable as long as you release the spot by April 30. It just means you want them to hold your spot.
- You are allowed to hold multiple offers up until April 15, at which point you are asked to reduce the number of acceptances you are holding to a maximum of three. By April 30, you can hold only one acceptance. You are allowed to

remain on wait lists after that time, however. Many applicants will need to hold on to multiple acceptances up until April 15 and April 30 in order to be able to compare financial aid offers.

- On the other hand, as soon as you can be sure you would prefer to go to school X where you have been accepted, over school Y where you have also been accepted, it does not make sense to hold on to the acceptance at school Y until April 15 or April 30. You should withdraw from school Y in that case, in order to free up the place for other applicants. Try not to delay the decision just to delay the decision. You can greatly help your fellow applicants and usually yourself by withdrawing from schools along the way in favor of other schools. This should only be done, however, after you have one acceptance.
- Detailed Application and Acceptance Protocols for Applicants are listed on the AAMC website. It is your responsibility to understand these in detail. See <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/application-and-acceptance-protocols-applicants/>
- OCS premed advisers can help you with managing your wait list strategies if that becomes an issue for you.

**BE SURE TO STAY IN CLOSE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR HOUSE
PREMED ADVISERS AND TO CONSULT WITH THE OCS ADVISERS AS
NEEDED FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT. GOOD LUCK!**