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The Medical School Application Process—A Marathon Not a Sprint OCS Workshop November 16, 2015

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?
- Would you benefit from post-bac enhancement of your GPA? [Post-bac information](#)
- Do you have a plan for the costs of the application process? We will focus more on this topic later, but you can apply to the AAMC Fee Assistance Program (FAP), check in with the Harvard Financial Aid Office, 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 manifested by research interests or other intellectual pursuits.
- Applicants are accepted with a wide range of all 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.
- Do not apply to medical school at a time when you have had no clinical experience of any type. Shadowing alone is not usually sufficient. You need to have had some direct experience with people in need.
- In general, while many medical schools grant deferrals for a variety of reasons, deferrals are not automatic and the willingness to give them varies from school to school. In general, medical schools expect you to apply in the year you plan to matriculate.
- A discussion about when to apply is a great topic for an appointment with an OCS premed adviser. We can help you think through the pros and cons of going directly to medical school after college versus taking one or two gap years.

2. Cleaning up your on-line 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.
- 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:

- Your House Premed Tutors. First and foremost, your House Tutors are an invaluable, crucial, indispensable resource as you go through the application process. They will know you best, will work with you at every stage and will create your Harvard Committee Letter (also referred to as the “House Letter”) which gives a huge boost to your application. Follow their instructions, requests, and advice carefully.
- MSAR (Medical School Admission Requirements for U.S. and Canadian Medical Schools). This online resource can be purchased at AAMC.org for \$25 and is essential. ([MSAR](#))
- *Medical School Admissions Data* report. This book contains data about medical school admissions that is specific to Harvard graduates. It can be purchased through the OCS front desk (either in person for \$5 or via the phone for \$5 plus postage) and is a valuable resource for figuring out how you as a Harvard applicant fit into the application process.
- OCS advisers. We hope that all students who are applying to medical schools meet with a premed adviser at OCS at least once. Some of you may want to meet with one of the OCS premed advisers much more than that. It is crucial to meet with us if you have an institutional action, have a low GPA or MCAT, have not had clinical experiences, are confused about when to apply, are applying internationally, are an international applicant, or if you have any unusual or difficult circumstances.
- OCS website. There is a wealth of information about the application process on our website, including resources for various OCS workshops.

- 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 (including 15 medical school fee waivers) and provides free access to the MSAR and other reference materials. [FAP](#)
- The application fees are as follows: \$160 AMCAS processing fee which includes one school; \$37 for each additional school; and secondary application fees of \$25 to \$100 per school. An applicant who applies to 20 schools and receives 20 secondary applications averaging \$75 a piece will have costs of \$2900 for the application process alone.
- Interview costs will be on top of this and are widely variable.
- The Harvard Financial Aid Office may be able to help you 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 score/s
- Letters of recommendation
- House letter
- School selection
- AMCAS application
- Beyond AMCAS: TMDSAS for Texas schools; AACOMAS for D.O. schools; Canadian applications including OMSAS; Applications to European schools
- Secondary application
- Interviews
- Post-acceptance timeline and other issues

6. Transcripts

- The details of how to represent your transcripts in the AMCAS application are covered in the AMCAS workshop that will take place in late April 2016. Filing out the application is complicated and requires considerable attention to detail. [AMCAS information on our website](#)
- Just 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/s and AMCAS will use the transcript/s you send to verify this information. Order your Harvard College transcript [here](#). Download a free copy of your Harvard transcript for yourself when you order it for AMCAS: [Unofficial Transcript](#). The process for ordering transcripts varies by undergraduate school. Familiarize yourself with the process and timeline of ordering any non-Harvard transcripts you will need to send.
- 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.
- BCPM GPA is composed of biology, chemistry, physics and math 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 explains the course distinctions and other aspects of filling out the application in detail. [AMCAS Instruction Manual](#) and [AMCAS Course Classification Guide Instructions](#)
- It is complicated. Come to the [AMCAS workshop](#) in late April.

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. Use your official name for everything. It can cause delays and worse if the name on your transcript is different from the name you give AMCAS or give your House for use in your letter.
- In this next cycle some of you will still be applying with the old MCAT, while most of you will be using the new MCAT. The old MCAT will be accepted for the 2017 cycle by almost all medical schools, but if you are using the old MCAT, check the list on aamc.org: [Medical school policies for accepting scores from the current and the new MCAT® exams](#) or individual school websites. For a school-by-school list of the oldest and latest MCAT test dates accepted for the 2016 application cycle, see [MCAT Exam Policies](#). (Add one year to these dates for approximate cut-offs for the 2017 application cycle.)

- 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 the April of the spring when 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 hard 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 of the spring when 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 4-5 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. House Letter

- Each House will have clear deadlines and expectations regarding the premed process but those deadlines and expectations will vary from House to House.
- For students who adhere to the deadlines, all house letters will be sent by August 15. Some will be sent in earlier.
- This August 15 letter submission deadline has been the rule at Harvard for a long time and our students 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 the premedical advisers are there to help you and support you, they are writing your letters. Be professional. Be on time. Be polite. Be grateful.

10. School selection

- This is a complicated and individualized process.
- Resources for this include most of the resources listed above. The MSAR will be invaluable. You can also use the chart of requirements, financial aid policy, and other admissions information on our website. <http://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/premed-academic-requirements>
- There are many factors to consider such as 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 House Tutor. A list that is 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, the premedical advisers at OCS are also happy to review your lists.
- Alumni evaluations on the OCS website are another source of school information. [Alumni Evaluations](#)

11. AMCAS application

- This is a complicated application and this subject is covered in detail in a workshop that will be held late April 2016. If you are applying this year, you should come to the workshop.
- Ignore the official deadlines for AMCAS. Your application needs to be in much earlier than that. Late applications are one of the common reasons for receiving 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. OCS holds a personal statement workshops in the spring. 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 we tell you or your Tutor tells 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 be verified anywhere from three to six weeks after you submit it. At that point it is officially released to schools. AMCAS begins transmitting verified applications in late June or early July.

12. Secondary applications

- Some schools screen applicants 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.
- 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.

13. Interviews

- We offer multiple interview workshops in the fall which cover the details related to interviewing. We will just focus here on timing.
- If you submit your applications early, you could receive interview invitations as early as late 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 out 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 doing this from Asia, Africa, Australia or remote areas.
- 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

- People get their first acceptance anytime from October 15 up to the week before matriculation.
- Some schools have rolling admission and some do not.
- For students who get a number of interviews, you can greatly simplify your life by having some schools on your list that have rolling admission. This may allow you to drop some schools that are lower down on 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 30th. It just means you want them to hold your spot.
- You are allowed to hold multiple offers up until April 30th, after which time you must be holding 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 30th 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 30th. 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 “traffic rules” are listed on the AAMC website. It is your responsibility to understand these in detail. [Traffic Rules for Applicants](#)
[Traffic Rules for Admissions Officers](#)
- OCS premed advisers can help you with managing your waitlist strategies if that becomes an issue for you.

STAY IN TOUCH. WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU NAVIGATE THIS PROCESS.