

Blog Title: Lessons from a former pre-med to other international applicants
By Peace Eneh, Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, '17

Disclaimer: I will be using this blog to share what I have learned from applying to medical school in the US. It will be very informal and is by no means the blueprint. These are just tips that might help. The whole application experience varies from person to person, and decisions are made on an individual basis so by no means are the tips presented here foolproof. I also have to say off the back here that most medical schools require that the pre-med coursework be completed at an American undergraduate institution and very few medical schools will accept coursework completed in Canada.

Choosing an Undergraduate Institution

There are a few things to consider if you have the privilege of being accepted to more than one US undergraduate program. Some undergraduate institutions have better systems in place to help their students complete the pre-med coursework and to obtain the relevant experiences required by medical schools. The institutions also have varying levels of involvement in the whole medical school application process so it is a good thing to think about these when making your decision. Here are some questions that would be good to ask:

- What is the structure of the pre-med coursework?
- Does the institution have a pre-med advising committee?
- What opportunities does the school provide for pre-meds to get relevant experiences in the field of medicine (volunteering, job shadowing, any relationship with hospitals in the area, opportunities for research)?
- How involved is the premed committee/faculty in the whole applications process: Do they write letters of recommendations? Do they review applications and keep track of MCAT scores, etc? Are they knowledgeable about the unique challenges that international students face with med school applications?
- Does the school provide career advising services? How proactive are these career advising services in helping students search for job opportunities/internships that will add to their relevant medical experiences? Are they knowledgeable about the unique challenges/restrictions that international students face in obtaining employment in the US?

Experiences that Matter

In addition to completing all the pre-med coursework, medical schools also want to see that you have done other things outside of academics. In other words they want to see that you are a well rounded student and not just a book worm. Having a 4.0 GPA with no other experiences will absolutely not get you into a medical school. Here is a list from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC, the official website for everything medical school related) for the types of experience that they looking for in the applicants:

- Artistic endeavors

- Community Service/Volunteer - Medical/Clinical
- Community Service/Volunteer - Not Medical/Clinical
- Conferences Attended
- Extracurricular Activities
- Hobbies
- Honors/Awards/Recognitions
- Intercollegiate Activities
- Leadership
- Military Service
- Paid Employment - Medical/Clinical
- Paid Employment - Not Medical/Clinical
- Physician Shadowing/Clinical Observation
- Presentations/Posters
- Publications
- Research/Lab
- Teaching/Tutoring/Teaching Assistant
- Global health experiences also*

My advice, find 2 or 3 experiences that fit into the categories above and excel at them, because they will be a way for you to show that you are interested in the medical field and show that you have explored this interest and still very much committed to this field. Medical schools are not only interested in why you want to become a physician, they also want to see what ways you have tested out your passion and how deeply you have explored your interest.

Extracurricular activities such as volunteering in hospitals, shadowing physicians, research, global experience, hospital employment/familiarity with hospital work space are at the top of the list of ways to explore and show your passion for the field.

However, do not over-commit. Avoid the urge to be involved in too many things at the same time because you will fall into the trap of spreading yourself too thin. I believe that medical schools also want to see a certain level of mastery in whatever you are committed to. Identify your passion (an area of medicine that you are really interested in) and look for experiences that will help you explore that topic. You could do research, internship, independent study, attend conferences, publication and other types of recognitions all around this topic of interest. This will help boost your application especially if you can tie it all in into your personal statement. For instance, the theme throughout my application was global health, which is a big passion of mine. I wrote about my trip to Bangladesh and how my undergrad research was on a topic that has a global impact. Also, I shared about how my background as an international student has influenced my decision to pursue a career in medicine with a focus on improving healthcare globally. The international focus was very clear throughout my application, and I believe it made my story memorable. **You definitely need something that will make you stand out from the thousands of applications that each school receives every year.** So I will emphasize this again: Find something that you are good at or that interests you in the medical field and be the best at. This will make you stand out. It also gives your application a focal point.

What's the deal with the MCAT?

I struggled with MCAT and I know many international students struggle as well. Find a way to overcome this challenge. You need to do really well on the MCAT (a score of 30 and above) to show that you can perform on the same level as the American students. The admission committee needs to know that you can keep up with the rigors and academic challenges of medical school, so although your MCAT score is not the end of the road to medical school, it is very important especially as an international student. This is because most of the medical schools that accept and have financial aid for international students are private, and unfortunately these schools are generally the more competitive ones. However, if you have tried everything you possibly can to get a better score and still not able to reach the 30 mark, this is not the end of the road for you if you have other things working in your favor, like a super strong GPA, an impressive research background, some publications, etc. Some schools recognize that some bright students have difficulty with standardized tests such as MCAT so your experiences might outweigh the not so great MCAT score.

The Personal Statement

The personal statement is another important component of the medical school application and should be taken seriously. Some medical school committee members might not be able to read through every application packet because of the sheer volume of applications they receive, but they try to read everyone's personal statement. This might then be your one shot to grab the attention of the committee member, to get them curious about your story, and motivate them to read the rest of your application. This means that you have about one page and half to tell them the most important things they need to know about you, things that will convince them that you deserve an opportunity to be considered for a position in the incoming class. As one of my supervisors who served on a pre-med admission committee told me, your mission statement should serve these 3 purposes: 1) Tell your story. How did your background or other life experiences impact your decision to pursue a career in medicine 2) Write about those experiences that show that you are passionate about medicine and ways that you have tested out this passion for medicine 3) Finally, it should answer this question: what do you see yourself doing in the future with a career in medicine?

It might be hard to see how all these parts fit together, but just have these in mind and have as much of the elements incorporated and you should be fine. ALSO start working on this statement on time. Actually, this is a part of your application that you can start working on way before you start the application. Get as much help as possible. Seek out people who are experienced in this area, like pre-med advisors or a mentor in the medical field. Also, finding help with proofreading for grammatical errors would be great. The last thing you want is a grammatical error in your personal statement. *(I will be happy to share a copy of my personal statement if people request for it, it is just a sample and one of the many ways that this could be done and should therefore be approached as such).* Medical schools also appreciate creativity in writing this piece so know your writing style and make it work.

I have also been told by someone who served on a prestigious medical school committee that, "Although your statement by itself will not get you into a medical school, it can for sure keep you out of one" so be careful what your share, don't be arrogant or boastful, but modest. I also know some people are not comfortable talking about their accomplishments but this is a place that you really need to talk yourself up but in a modest and sincere way.

Choosing the right medical school for you

Many pre-meds apply to an average of 20-25 medical schools in order to increase their chances of getting into one, but I think this is a waste of resources. There should be no reason to apply to that many schools. The concept of a safety school is a foe. I did not get any invitation to interview at any of my "safety schools". The truth is that based on your grades and experiences, the medical schools know when you include them as a safety school. AMCAS (American Medical College Application Service) lists the mean GPA and MCAT scores of students who matriculate at the different medical schools. If you have good stats and a reasonable number of experiences under your belt there should be no good reason to be applying to a school with mean GPA and MCAT scores much lower than your stats (unless there is another reason you are interested in that school and you should be able to show them why). So my advice is to **apply only to those medical schools that you really want to go to if offered the opportunity**. There is no harm in dreaming big and applying to the best medical schools (which I greatly encourage because those coincidentally are the ones with private/institutional fundings for international students) but at the same time be realistic with coming up with your list based on your grades and experiences.

Another reason not to apply to so many schools is how expensive and mentally draining it is to do so. Applying to medical school is an expensive process starting from registering for the MCAT, paying for the primary and secondary applications, and then arranging for transportation and lodging for the interviews. It is a wise idea to be conservative with the list of medical schools that you apply to. This process is also very draining mentally because filling out the primary application, researching the schools, writing all the essays for the secondary application and getting all the reference letters to the medical schools can be very taxing. I think it is better to apply to fewer schools and spend more time and energy making those applications and essays stronger and well focused. This is better than spreading yourself too thin trying to complete the numerous applications and getting worn out by the process. I believe medical schools know from your application when you are applying for applying's sake. They also know from your application when you are really interested in the school because your application will be well developed and rounded. The medical schools want to know that you are passionate about their school and this will be evident in the quality of your work, your application.

Financing Medical School

Don't worry too much about funding for medical school till you actually get into a school. Most private/big med schools will have a way to deal with financing medical school but it is a good idea to keep this in mind when selecting the medical schools that you want to apply to. Research financial aid/loan opportunities for international students. A good way to gauge this is to check

the percentage of international students who matriculate from the school. If there is a bigger percentage of international students matriculating from a medical school chances are they have a relatively good financing options for international students. Financing options are definitely good questions to ask financial aid officers when you are visiting a school.

The Interview, say what?

This is your opportunity and definitely the place to show them that you are the person you wrote about on paper. Interviews serve about 3 purposes. 1) The medical schools want to ensure that the person on paper is an actual person and not a robot. Chances are if they liked you on paper, they will like you in person so far as you were honest and sincere throughout your application. Just be the person you wrote about and you should be fine. 2) The admission committee uses this opportunity to get more information about the things that you wrote about. Sometimes they want to learn more about your background as an international student, especially since they are not as familiar with how things work in our countries. They are usually interested in our stories and feel free to use this opportunity to fill in some details that you were not able to include in your application due to the limited space available to write it all. 3) The interview is also an opportunity for you to evaluate the medical school. You will usually get a good sense of what the school is like based on your interactions with the faculty and current students who are part of the admission committee. If you don't feel like the school wants you to be there or you don't feel like you fit in with their mission then you need to put that into consideration when making a final decision. However, this is usually a luxury for those that get accepted to more than one school so this is why it is a good idea to apply to those schools that have the same ideals as you do. Take the time to research the schools that you are applying to, read their mission statement (every medical school has one), and look at the kinds of residencies their students get into. This will also be helpful to you when completing the secondary application because you can better present your experiences in a way that shows that your interests are compatible with what the school can offer. The medical schools will also be able to see that your passion lines up with theirs.