

# Beyond the MCAT: Here's what else med schools are looking for

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There's no denying that the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) is given heavy weight in whether a school accepts a prospective student, but it's far from the only factor.

In a survey of medical school admissions faculty conducted by the Association of American Medical Colleges, MCAT scores were listed among the most important factors when considering medical students. But a number of other criteria were also listed among the most important in considering applicants.

So what are medical schools looking for besides a satisfactory test score? Let's take a look.

## Undergraduate GPA and prerequisites

In terms of metrics, grade-point average (GPA) is going to be the other key number that programs consider. Schools may also have required course work that students can complete during their undergraduate or supplementary studies. Schools may calculate cumulative GPA as well as an applicants' GPA in the scientific and mathematical fields that pertain more closely to medicine.

Deanna Hughes is director of residential admissions at A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine, one of the 37 medical schools that is a member of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education consortium.

"If somebody didn't do well on the MCAT [and gets in] they probably have strong grades in undergrad," Hughes said.

## Clinical and social service work

Schools want examples of your leadership potential as well as your capacity to help others. The specific type of volunteer experience preferred will depend on the program. But, speaking generally, clinical experience doesn't always outweigh non-clinical experience.

Students with low MCAT scores “may be able to get in with their match to the mission and their grades alone,” Hughes said. “Our mission is to serve medical underserved communities. We are looking for students who have exposure to underserved populations whether that’s in a mission trip or going out and feeding the homeless. That kind of a capacity to serve—if we could see the heart of the student—that is just as important as a test score.”

## A strong narrative

Your reasons for pursuing medicine are often laid out in your personal statement. Your second chance to reinforce them comes in the interview process.

Beth M. Piraino, MD, is associate dean of admissions and financial aid at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine (Pitt), also a member of AMA consortium.

“I look for [an applicant’s] motivation for going into medicine,” Dr. Piraino said. “I want to make sure people are not coming to med school because their parents want them to come. I want to make sure they know what medicine is all about, which means they have exposed themselves to medicine through working through a clinic in some form.”

## Background

Another factor that those surveyed about admissions listed among the most important is personal background. Schools value lived experiences and creating a physician work force that has greater resemblance to the patients they serve. That may mean some schools put more weight in a student’s upbringing, and how that has translated to their desire to practice medicine.

Tonya Fancher, MD, MPH, is the associate dean for workforce innovation and community engagement at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine (UC Davis), another AMA consortium member school.

“We value the experiences that students bring to medical school,” Dr. Fancher said. “While we want students to be smart and adaptable, we also value their diverse backgrounds, which can enrich our learning environment and enhance care for our patients.”