

Going directly from college to medical school: What it takes

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The average age of students entering medical school is 24, yet medical school admissions personnel attest that a good chunk of matriculants to medical school do so directly from undergraduate study.

Taking that direct route from college to medical school requires a game plan. What does that look like? Admissions officials at two medical schools offered their insight. Here's a look at what they had to say.

Work with a premed advisor

There is a set of general requirements that are going to be applicable to most every medical school. Your undergraduate institution very likely has a premed or prehealth advisor. These people will be familiar with the requirements.

John D. Schriener, PhD, is associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, one of 37 member schools of the AMA's Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

He does see applications from graduating college students that are excellent.

"They have it going on. Performing academically, being involved with some great service or volunteer work, research," Schriener said. "What that tells me is here's somebody who has incredible time-management skills and is driven and focused on what they want to do."

Get organized early

To go straight from undergrad to medical school, you'll have to do double duty, in that certain benchmarks within the application process will have to be done while you're also responsible for your undergrad coursework. One example: Taking the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), which students will have to do during their junior year.

"You have to be completely competitive as you finish your junior year," said Deanna Hughes, director of residential admissions at A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona, also a member of the AMA consortium. "You have to have a competitive GPA [grade point average] and all the clinical and shadowing contacts all lined up. But it's difficult to get there. It takes a very motivated student."

Show commitment to service

When it comes to admissions, it's not all MCAT scores and grades. Community-service experiences can speak to a candidate's motivation for pursuing a career in medicine. There should be plenty of opportunities to find those on campus in college or in the local area.

"One of the things that we are looking for are folks who want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, somebody who wants to be a contributor and wants to make a difference in the training environment and the community they serve," Schriener said. "We love it when we see folks who are getting out of their comfort zone, maybe doing some international [volunteer] work. Folks who are broadening their horizons."

All that having been said, Dr. Schriener added that students should not overextend themselves.

"There are some folks who spread themselves too thin. Being in 20 clubs isn't going to make up for a substandard GPA," he said.

Don't force it

While it may seem like the natural progression to go straight from one level of education to another, there is no problem with taking one, or several, gap years. In fact, that time could offer candidates a chance to have dedicated study time to prepare for the MCAT, strengthen their application and put more thought into their career trajectory.

"Make sure you know in your heart of hearts that this is what you want to do [and] that you are prepared to fully commit yourself to this [training] for at least seven years," Schriener said. "And do it for the right reasons, not for mom and dad and not for the big bucks."