

Why a low GPA may not sink your medical school application

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Matriculants entering medical school in the 2018–2019 admissions cycle registered a 3.72 mean grade-point average (GPA) in their undergraduate coursework, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. Still, if you underperformed in undergrad but dream of working as a physician, you have options.

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 spoke about how a candidate with a below-average undergraduate GPA can make a career as a physician a reality.

How much does GPA matter for med school applications?

A student's GPA and scores on the Medical College Admissions Test tend to be the key metrics factored in the admissions process. A recent AAMC study included a list of the most important factors admissions offices considered when looking at potential medical students.

MCAT scores and grade-point averages were listed among the categories of criteria given highest weight. However, with medical schools striving to understand the broader competencies a candidate brings to the table, they report also considering a number of less tangible factors, such as leadership and interview results, community service, and volunteer work inside and outside of medicine.

"We rely on the holistic view in the admission process," Schriener said. "That being said, GPA is very important. You can predict future success by looking at past success and looking at one's academic track record is often a good barometer of how they might fare."

Which numbers matter most for med school applications?

Your GPA in the sciences is going to have more weight than your overall GPA, but that doesn't mean a student can mail it in outside of their core coursework.

"Just because you're focusing on bio-chem doesn't mean it's OK to blow off art history," Schriener said. "You should be concerned about your entire academic performance."

When schools get an applicant's grades, they are broken down to include the GPA for each year, GPA in science-related classes, and overall GPA. If you show improvement later in your undergraduate studies, that helps, Schriener said.

"When looking at GPA, you don't just look at the raw number, you're looking at trends in grades, along with the depth and breadth of science coursework. An upward trend is always something that you want to see," he said.

What if your undergrad GPA doesn't cut it for med school?

If you apply to medical school and don't get in, it's wise to solicit feedback from an admissions office employee. Schriener said he's glad to offer advice. In cases when an applicants' GPA is holding them back, he recommends they get back in the classroom and enhance their academic profile. One option for students looking to boost their academic metrics is to enroll in post-baccalaureate programs designed for medical school applicants that have a focus on science. You can also strengthen your credentials by pursuing a master's degree in a biomedical science related subject.

"If you're someone who has a low science GPA and is trying to bolster that profile, depending on where you're coming from a post-bacc program may enhance your viability," he said. "You want to light it up with your performance. You have to make the most of that post-bac or graduate work." An applicant can also do volunteer work or add life experience, perhaps in the community service arena, to help bolster their chance for admissions. This, however, does not always offset a subpar GPA. In the end, there's no exact formula, Schriener said.

"Sometimes there are folks with a little below average science GPA, but they excel and have an incredible MCAT score. Maybe somebody has another skill set or life experience that really fits the bill for our mission," he said. "It comes down to a case-by-case basis."