Top 4 questions to ask your premed adviser

OCT 8, 2019

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If you are an undergraduate student pondering a future as a physician, one of the best resources to help you start that journey is likely on your own campus in the form of premed or prehealth advisers. Professionals who focus on helping students prepare to apply to medical school, these advisers are on most college campuses in the U.S.

Jo Scullion is an assistant director for health careers and biosciences at the University of California, Berkeley Career Center. She interacts daily with students, typically in their sophomore years and beyond, who aspire to become medical students.

Those interactions vary greatly based on a student’s needs. Still, Scullion was able to identify a list of key questions medical students should ask their premed adviser and how she typically answers them.

When should I apply to med school?

This question, Scullion says, is less about age and your station in life and more about the state of your application.

“The answer is: when you are competitive and when you are ready,” she said. “What I have found with Berkeley students is some are very ready. They have planned it from day one. They complete all the coursework and take the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and apply at the end of their junior year.

“For some students it’s just too hard to get everything done,” she said. “I encourage those students to take their time and consider a gap year.”

How do I set myself up as a strong med school applicant?

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/medical-students/preparing-medical-school/top-4-questions-ask-your-premed-adviser

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This is a question that more students should ask, but not one that Scullion hears frequently. She encourages students both in academics and in their volunteer experiences to follow their passions.

Medical schools will see that as a pro.

“Follow what you are really interested in,” she said. “Don’t do things that you find are menial just to build a resume. I have had students volunteer in a clinic, only to find themselves filing paper. They will come in and say this isn’t helping anybody and I’m not learning anything. I typically tell them it’s not a good fit and to find something else.”

How should I get a recommendation letter for med school?

Scullion says students should have three letters on file from instructors, and it’s not always easy to find the right ones to write them.

“Berkeley is such a big school,” she said. “Many of the classes where students are going to be concerned about getting a letter are sciences classes that have 500 students. “I usually tell students: Have the person who knows you best write one of your letters. Oftentimes, they ask graduate student instructors to write a letter and have the professor co-sign them.”

How well-rounded is my portfolio?

Scullion breaks an application into five different parts that she refers to as a student’s portfolio.

“First is GPA and MCAT scores,” she said, naming the first two parts of the portfolio. “The third thing—a big one—is to do clinical shadowing and understand the role of the physician, their scope of practice and their commitment to medicine. You need to confirm this is what you want.

“The next one is research. Evidence-based medicine research is hard,” Scullion said. “I say do it over a summer and if you love it stick with it. If not, go back to clinical. The last one is community service. They are going to be very service-oriented as physicians. It’s a broad category and you can do lots of different things to show your areas of interest.”