

Medical school secondary applications: Make yours stand out

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A medical school application typically comes in two parts.

The first portion is distributed by the American Medical College Application Service and is known as the primary application. It asks for general information that is relevant to all schools, such as a prospective student's scores on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and undergraduate GPA.

Part two of the application process, called the secondary or supplemental application, will come from institutions a potential medical student applies to. While secondary applications do have a few common traits—they typically ask for letters of recommendation—much of the inquiry is going to be specific to the institution.

In fact, whether or not an applicant gets a secondary application will depend on the institution. For instance, at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine (UC Davis), less than half of applicants receive a secondary application request.

Admissions officers from UC Davis spoke about the secondary application process. These are a few of the key tips they offered for prospective medical students.

Learn the factors medical schools use to evaluate applicants.

Speak to a school's mission

Medical schools all aim to train the next generation of physicians, but the manner institutions go about doing that varies. In the case of UC Davis, much of the curriculum—including many medical student opportunities to work with patients—revolves around improving care for underserved communities. Doing a little research on a school's mission can go a long way in terms of shaping your application.

“Because each school develops the content, [a secondary application] is an opportunity to see what

that school values,” said Mark Henderson, MD, associate dean for admissions and outreach at UC Davis, one of the 37 medical schools in the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education consortium. “Every school is going to require letters of recommendation, but other essay prompts—such as the behavioral questions [on secondary applications]—are ways for the student to demonstrate how they might fit or contribute to the school’s mission.”

You may want to address the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Henderson said.

“Elaborating on the impact of Covid on your or other communities is a very pertinent topic to address in your secondary application.”

Find out how to answer one of the key questions at every medical school admissions interview.

Triple-check

Make sure you include all required materials and answer all questions in their entirety. Also, just because you included material on your initial or primary application, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t include it again on a secondary application. The documents may be examined by different admissions officials at different stages of the process.

If you do run into confusion about what you need to include or what a question is looking for, you can simply call the admissions office.

“It’s always better if you double-check,” said Charlene Green, administrative director of UC Davis’ Offices of Admissions, Student and Resident Diversity, and Student Development. “We have a team of three and we are happy to answer calls. I even do appointments with students who are in the admissions cycle to provide better clarification.”

A bit more than 40% of applicants matriculated to medical school during the most recent application cycle, according to the website Med Edits. That figure fell, in part, due to a boom in applications. An incomplete secondary application is just another reason to put a candidate in the “not accept” pile, Green said.

Get information on the increase in medical school applications and what it means for pre-meds.

Be specific

In your essay answers and your work experiences, it’s best to say how your past has shaped where

you want to go in your future.

“Being genuine really helps your application,” Green said. “What I tell applicants is it’s important to say the things you want to do in medicine, but it’s more important to say why you want to do them. Many applicants have experiences working with physicians, but they don’t explain how those experiences benefited them or made them want to be physicians.”

Read the top tips for pre-meds hoping to get into medical school.

Don’t wait

The reality is that it’s a seller’s market when it comes to medical school admissions, so waiting until the deadline to submit a secondary application doesn’t help your cause.

Green tells applicants to have a set of responses to questions prepared and then tailor them to fit each secondary application. That saves time and allows you to submit them more quickly.

“Timing is important, and I always tell applicants to be organized,” she said.

“As soon as you get a secondary application, you should be ready to submit. We do give 30 days, but the later it is in the season, the fewer spots are available, so again applicants should be ready to go once they receive a secondary application.”

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding but figuring out a medical school’s prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge into itself. The AMA pre-med glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start medical school off strong with the AMA.