

College freshman to M1: A timeline to medical school admission

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Four years is a long time. Yet if you have designs on entering medical school as you enter college—or if you want to keep your options open—there are steps you can take during each of those four years to strengthen your chances of making a career in medicine.

John D. Schriener, PhD, spoke with the AMA to offer guidance on what students aiming to apply to medical school should be doing during each year of their undergraduate education to make it happen successfully.

Schriener 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.

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 premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Freshman year: Pick major, identify resources

Your first year of college is a time of exploring your academic options. While you may not be expected to declare a major, you want to identify the topics that you find most fulfilling.

“It could be in the natural sciences, but it could also be sociology or anthropology,” Schriener said. “You need to align yourself with a major that you can immerse yourself in and enjoy. The one thing you have to understand is you will be expected to comply with the required medical school prerequisites, no matter what your major.”

In exploring what your school has to offer, you also should start to look for resources that will make the process of building a body of work that will make you a strong medical school applicant. To do so, it's wise to seek a premed adviser, if your institution has one. As a freshman, your premed adviser can help you begin the process of building a premed portfolio, the experiences and documents that will be the basis for your medical school application. Learn with the AMA about which college majors prepare you best for medical school.

Sophomore year: Research, required coursework

Your sophomore year is going to be your last chance to make sure you continue to fulfill core requirements for entering medical school before entering your major. If you are not on a scientific track, it's best to work with your premed adviser and academic adviser to create a schedule that builds a solid foundation in topics that will be broached during medical school.

Your premed adviser can also help you to better understand what schools are looking for, which is going to include volunteer experience—though your options for patient-facing volunteer experiences may be limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic—and begin the process of researching medical schools. Read about the four questions to consider when researching medical schools.

Junior year: MCAT, letters

If you are plotting a course from undergrad to medical school, junior year is likely to be the most rigorous of your academic career to date. You are likely going to take the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) during the spring of your junior year. Upper-level science courses can help with the MCAT preparation process, but you're going to want to make some time for dedicated MCAT prep. Due to the pandemic, the MCAT calendar and test format are slightly different for test-takers in 2020.

You're also going to want to start identifying faculty members who would write you favorable letters of recommendation. "When you're looking for letter writers, you want to make sure that you're not springing the request on someone at the last minute. Give them a heads up and have a current CV that you can give that letter writer." Learn why the MCAT is just not another standardized exam.

Rising senior summer: applying

If you're applying to medical school directly from college, you are likely going to want to have your applications submitted in the summer before your senior year.

Medical school applications can be submitted as early as May, and Schriener says “it’s best to be in early to keep your options open. Once your junior year coursework is complete, you should have time to apply, and applications should be in by midsummer.”

Senior year: Interviews, acceptance

In terms of the academic year, as a senior “hopefully you’ve created some breathing room for yourself,” Schriener said. “Make sure you’ve set up your schedule so you can accommodate a wealth of med school interviews in the fall and early spring term.”

Schools that have rolling admissions are likely to inform you of your admissions status sooner, with those schools notifying you as early as the winter. The latest you are likely to hear on admission is early spring. By the end of April, the American Medical College Application Service sets a deadline for students to narrow their acceptances down to a single medical school.

“Spring semester would be a time to finish strong, and enjoy those last moments of undergrad with friends, colleagues and faculty,” he said. “Get your mindset ready to have a great summer and get ready to work harder than ever in the fall.”

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