

With volunteering limited, med schools adjust admissions expectations

JUL 8, 2020

Brendan Murphy

Senior News Writer

Volunteer hours are typically among the most heavily weighed factors in the medical school admissions process. But, in these atypical times, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, that may not be the case for the upcoming cycle of applicants.

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 Medicine Consortium. "I think it's the consensus with my colleagues across the spectrum of med schools that we've all come to an understanding that this cycle is going to be limited in terms of expectations based upon what would be the normal volunteer activities," Schriener said.

Limited opportunity

The conventional wisdom is that 100 hours of volunteer experience is the benchmark medical schools are looking for. For applicants in the 2021 cycle, having no volunteer experience still may not reflect well on your application. "We're going to hopefully still see a bit of a track record of service and volunteer work and clinical exposure and students not waiting until the last minute to engage in that activity," Schriener said. "We anticipate that there will be folks who point to COVID-19 [as the reason for lacking volunteer experience]. At the same time, they've had their first couple of years of school, so there has been a window of time where they could have been doing something."

Still, the reality is that any sort of clinical volunteer opportunity is likely off the table—medical students are restricted from the clinical environment due to the pandemic, although medical students have gotten creative in offering assistance. The same could be possible for a premed. Schriener offers some words of caution to potential premed volunteers.

“Clinical experience is going to be tough to come by because of potential risk factors,” Schriner said. “There are still activities in your community to pursue, but be cautious. “I would tell anybody looking for opportunities to help in the community, make a difference in others’ lives, and that first and foremost you want to make sure that any activity you are looking to get engaged in won’t sacrifice the health and safety of others, including yourself.”

A time for personal growth

For those still hoping to serve, remember that risks relate to the specific nature of the activities being considered. Some meaningful roles can be served entirely remotely, such as manning hotlines or helping local health departments with epidemiologic tracking and research. Other activities can allow for physical distancing; Schriner touts food banks as possible options. He also advises potential volunteers to contact local social services organizations to see if they have opportunities.

Beyond that, Schriner sees the current moment as one for creating greater awareness of what is going on around the world, in our country, and in our own communities.

A time for self-reflection and social responsibility

“Right now, obviously we are dealing with a pandemic, and in the midst of dealing with a lot of racial and social unrest,” he said. “We as individuals can take opportunities to try to understand and appreciate the lived reality of others who are feeling the frustrations related to the racial, and social unrest, and inequity, and learn more about ourselves, our perspective, and how we can lean in and make a difference.

The AMA provides open-access resources for students interested in learning about more health inequities and the social determinants of health.

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