

Don't let a sophomore slump dash your medical school dream

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Academic downturns happen during undergrad. Not letting them stand in the way of your ambitions to be a physician requires a plan.

Robert Cannon, PhD, professor emeritus in the biology department at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) has advised prospective medical students for more than 40 years and has seen students turn a semester with a couple Ds into a career as an MD. How? He offered five key steps to bouncing back from a sophomore slump.

Rebound

If an academic slump lasts more than a semester or two it's not a slump. It's a trend. To break out of a slump, you need to identify the root causes and address them, Cannon said.

"If a person has an academic catastrophe for a semester or even a year, the faster they can turn that around and show an upward grade trend the better," he said.

"The key part is to figure out what caused the slump and then develop strategies to overcome those things. If it was some kind of issue related to personal care, a person needs to figure out how they can take care of themselves better. If it's an academic matter, they ought to be talking to their academic advisor and their professors."

Gain insight on what it takes to go directly to med school from college.

Round out your application

A GPA is a key to med school admissions, but it's not the only criteria. Scores on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) also weigh heavily. For many students a high MCAT score can augment a

GPA that is on the lower end, as do other less tangible metrics like volunteer experience and prior clinical experience.

“What has or has not happened is the classroom performance has to be validated or bolstered by the MCAT,” Cannon said. “But when everybody has a GPA and an MCAT score, then it becomes patient care experience, volunteerism and showing commitment to others who are different than you. Academics is not going to be sufficient for admission to medical school.”

Find out what med school admissions offices are looking for in applicants.

Take your time

If you struggled for a period during undergrad, going straight to medical school may not be the feasible route. Taking time to prepare for your MCATs, get the necessary experiences can help.

Another option is a postbaccalaureate program. A postbaccalaureate (post-bacc) course of study means a student is taking course work after the completion of their baccalaureate (frequently called undergraduate) degree is complete.

“It may take longer than a couple years if the slump was academic,” Cannon said. “The important thing to remind people is you don’t have to apply after college, especially if you need to improve on a slump that happened during undergrad.

“If you graduate with a 3.1 or 3.2 GPA, it could be worth thinking about an academic enhancing post-bacc program. It will allow you to take another year of upper-level science courses. When I talk to folks about those programs, I tell them they need to get highest GPA they can get. I’m talking about something between 3.6-4.0.”

In addition to enabling you to demonstrate better grades, such programs will fill some of the gaps created during your undergrad slump and help you get prepared for the course work you would encounter in medical school.

Learn what to look for in postbacc program.

Accept responsibility and demonstrate growth

Your med school personal statement shouldn't be a forum for excuses. Cannon recommends acknowledging your slump and how you grew from it.

"In the personal statement don't start with a weakness, and don't end with a weakness," he said. "Embed the paragraph where you want to explain some sort of academic issue and make it short in the middle of your personal statement. Take responsibility. Don't try to blame it on something else.

"Lots of people have an academic hiccup that isn't a dealbreaker. Med schools, the way I see it, like to see that students and applicants have done things that are hard. Overcoming something like an academic problem and coming to grip with it, that will be perceived as an important accomplishment when it comes time to apply. Will it guarantee admission? There are no guarantees."

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.

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