Ngozi Anachebe, MD, on COVID-19 and 2022 med school applications

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, Ngozi Anachebe, MD, associate dean for admissions and student affairs at Morehouse School of Medicine, join us to discuss problems—and opportunities the pandemic has presented for the incoming class of 2022.

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Speaker

- Ngozi Anachebe, MD, associate dean, admissions and student affairs, Morehouse School of Medicine

Transcript
Dr. Anachebe: Thank you so much. Unlike the 2021 application cycle where the aspiring medical school students had already accomplished a lot of the prerequisites, the shadowing, the volunteer experiences and have taken the MCAT, most of them, for those who will be applying for the 2022 class, many of them have not accomplished a lot of those milestones because of the COVID pandemic constraints. A lot of the places where they would volunteer were closed. Many practices are not accepting aspiring medical school applicants to shadow their physicians. And also many of them have not taken the MCAT. Typically, many applicants hope to take the MCAT in their junior year. So with all those things going along, many applicants feel not quite as prepared as in prior years.

Unger: So, that is a serious wrench in the works there in terms of all that kind of the run-up to the application process. And obviously, that's going to change the way that these applicants have to be viewed by medical school. So, how will admission offices have to change the way they evaluate this new group of students?

Dr. Anachebe: I think many medical schools realize these COVID pandemic containment realities and going to be flexible in the way they evaluate applicants. So, it's not going to be just hard numbers. How many hours of shadowing experience and the different places that the applicant shadowed? Or who wrote the letters of recommendation? Or how many volunteer hours did the applicant put in? They're really looking at the applicant truly in a holistic manner, trying to understand the applicant's life experiences and also how COVID has impacted that applicant. So, it's not just about the hard numbers. And what we're telling applicants is to really do the best they can with what they have and apply.

Unger: I'm curious, we read early in the year about what people were calling the Fauci Effect and more folks interested in attending medical school. Are you thinking that you'll see a greater number of applicants because of that?

Dr. Anachebe: I think so. At least for my school, we received our highest number of applications for the 2021, the class that would matriculate next month. And part of that I think is driven by the fact that students saw their communities and how COVID decimated their communities. And they want to help. Being on the sidelines, feeling helpless, a lot of them are driven to become physicians so that they can go back to their communities and make a difference. So I anticipate that the same increased volume in applications, we will see that in the 2022 class. My fear is those students who may not have those hard numbers that typically applicants are encouraged to have, that they may not apply. So I
am encouraging applicants to apply with what they have and be able to specify in their personal statement why they are applying to the medical schools, what they wish to accomplish with their medical education and how they will bring value to the communities they hope to practice in.

**Unger:** I mean, that's good advice. And you mentioned before about letters of recommendation, which are obviously a very key part of a student's application. Do you have any kind of advice for how prospective students should adjust with the recommendations?

**Dr. Anachebe:** Again, schools are going to be flexible. Understanding that with the virtual learning experience, many faculty don't have that close relationship with the applicants who will be asking them for letters of recommendation. And in fact, some faculty feel reluctant to really recommend a student that they've only seen on Zoom. As you well know for many classes, you may have a 100, 200, 300 students all on Zoom. You can't really form a close knit relationship with an applicant. So, we're encouraging applicants to seek out persons who know them very well. It could be a church leader. It could be a high school student. They could have taken an advanced college placement course in high school or honors course. It could be a student who worked in a grocery store since teenage years and has gotten to know the manager. Somebody who can speak to their values, their work ethic, their service orientation, their ability to get along and their humility to learn. All those are important, not just from the hardcore science professors.

**Unger:** So you mentioned before that a lot of kind of the run-up and these experiences that medical students might bring into their application process, they obviously missed because of the pandemic. Is there any advice that you would have for how to, I guess, fill that gap?

**Dr. Anachebe:** So, a lot of those students may have done other things that are not in the realm of going outside and volunteering. They may have helped their families. They may have taken care of loved ones. They may have helped their neighbors. Those things are important because they do demonstrate service orientation. So they need to be able to articulate that, be able to describe what they did and why. Medical schools will find that very useful.

**Unger:** There's a lot of talk in medical education about, and this was prior to the pandemic, about kind of less reliance on some metrics and trying to push for, I think you used the word holistic review of applicants. And has the pandemic driven more schools to kind of think this way and implement this in a greater level of holistic review?

**Dr. Anachebe:** I think so. I think medical schools, I mean, they experienced the pandemic themselves. And they realize that it really is important to be flexible. Many schools are accepting pass/fail courses. Many schools are accepting online courses. And many schools ... some schools are MCAT optional. So again, they are looking at the applicant in a comprehensive manner to understand the applicant's life story and how COVID has impacted them. So, applicants have to apply. I keep saying that if you're not in the game, you'll never have a chance to live your dream. You only need one medical school to accept you. Schools are looking at trajectory. What is the trend and
what obstacles have the applicant overcome in making their decision who to accept or not.

**Unger:** So if I took away anything from that is the pandemic affected everyone and don't be dissuaded by these things in terms of the experience, the scores. This is kind of a unique situation and there'll be a unique way of viewing applicants, if I kind of got that right.

**Dr. Anachebe:** Absolutely. It's our shared reality. COVID affected all of us. Some people more so than others. And medical schools understand that very well. And I think they're going to be flexible.

**Unger:** Good. I think that's very important. And I'm sure your words of encouragement will be really important to this year's group of prospective medical school students. That concludes today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back with another segment shortly. In the meantime, for additional resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us today and please take care.

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