

How Medical Schools Review Applications

You know the time and effort you put into your medical school and secondary applications, but what happens after you click submit? Here is what the process looks like for medical school admissions officers and staff.

What are admissions officers looking for?

While expectations, missions, policies, and requirements are unique to each medical school, many schools look for students who demonstrate an ability to handle challenging coursework and have the personal attributes needed to work with people. It's important for applicants to show that they've done well in upper-level science courses, and "doing well on the MCAT® exam shows that you can handle medical school coursework," says Irene Tise, admissions officer in the Office of Medical Student Admissions at Wake Forest School of Medicine.

Lori Nicolaysen, assistant dean of admissions at Weill Cornell Medical College, adds that they "seek students who have also demonstrated exceptional personal initiative. Such initiative may take the form of leadership, creativity, research, community service, motivation, or other life experiences."

Mickey Foxwell, M.D., associate dean for admissions at University of Maryland School of Medicine says, "Each applicant needs to be as sure as possible that this is what they want to do with their life. That motivation can be demonstrated through academic achievement and also through exposure to clinical medicine and community service. Does the applicant know what it's like to take care of someone? Does the applicant have an idea about the advantages and disadvantages of a career in medicine?"

Schools also look for evidence that an applicant has demonstrated good judgment, compassion, and selflessness—qualities every physician should embody. Applicants can show evidence through their involvement in extracurricular activities, letters of evaluation, and their personal statement.

What happens when my application is received?

Each medical school has its own nuanced process for reviewing applications. For example, "Weill Cornell invites all applicants to complete the secondary application," Ms. Nicolaysen shares. "Once the file is complete (including secondary application, letters of evaluation, and MCAT scores), the application is moved to screening. A number of experienced admissions committee members serve as



screeners. Although Weill Cornell has fourth-year medical students on the admissions committee, the students do not screen applications."

Dr. Raquel D. Arias, associate dean of admissions at Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, explains, "In order to give every candidate a fair review of their personal qualities and accomplishments, a single screener evaluates all candidates with a particular MCAT score at our school. This controls for the inevitable influence that this important test has on the process. An admissions officer reads every application submitted to the school." (There is no automated filter.)

At Wake Forest School of Medicine, Ms. Tise explains, "Because of the large number of applications we receive, we use a formula that separates and groups applicants based on their AMCAS® primary application. The groups are: 1) Proceed and send a secondary application, (2) Hold for MCAT score or other extenuating circumstances and notify candidates, and (3) Risk, based on academics.

Those candidates in the "risk" category are reviewed individually by the associate dean and an executive committee of five faculty and admissions committee members. From there, a decision is made to either proceed with the application process or reject the application."

Typically, after secondary applications are submitted, the associate dean and a committee review the applications and place candidates into interview pools. Because of the large number of applicants, only a small percentage is asked to interview.

How do reviewers decide whom to interview?

Medical schools consider each applicant’s academic proficiency, whether they are likely to thrive in the culture of the institution, and if their experiences, attributes, and goals are in line with the school’s mission and goals. Inevitably, medical schools receive many more qualified applicants than they can interview and matriculate. The decision to interview one student over another can be very difficult to say the least.

“It is incredibly challenging because there are so many admirable candidates,” Ms. Nicolaysen explains. “Ultimately, the committee screeners attempt to identify the best qualified applicants from diverse academic and personal backgrounds whom we deem most likely to build a dynamic learning environment at Weill Cornell and to become leaders in medicine.”

Dr. Foxwell adds, “At University of Maryland, outstanding grades and MCAT scores do not guarantee that an applicant will be invited to interview. Just as important are extracurricular activities and life experiences, essays and personal comments in AMCAS, and letters of recommendation.”

Dr. Arias says, “The path to becoming a physician is unique to each applicant; therefore, we do not mandate any particular course of study. We have no preference for a particular major (or minor).

Evidence of the personal attributes of integrity, adaptability, language skills, collaboration, and a commitment to service are evaluated with an eye toward the development of physician scientists. We infer the desired applicant qualities from both the content of the application and the care with which it is delivered. Every aspect of the application is important. Applicants who speak in their own voice, without “spin,” is especially valued.”

Additionally, some public medical schools also may consider an out-of-state applicant’s ties to the state or institution if non-state residents are not typically considered for matriculation. (For more information, check with individual medical school websites or consult the AAMC’s Medical School Admission Requirements website.)

What are some common mistakes applicants make?

The same tips you might have received for undergraduate or job applications hold true for medical school applications. Always tell the truth and be sure to mention activities and volunteer, research, or work experiences that are most important, and if possible, occurred within the last few years. “Take your AMCAS essay questions seriously,” counsels Ms. Tise. “These essays are not creative writing exercises. You may start off with a descriptive experience, but, move quickly into how and why you want to become a physician and how this experience helped determine that. Also, proofread carefully. There are no excuses for punctuation and grammatical errors. We know you are applying to several schools, but be careful to include the correct name in secondary materials.

“Redundant information is a waste of space. Inconsistencies can call an applicant’s authenticity into question,” cautions Ms. Nicolaysen. “We advise not including high school activities or activities in which your participation was minimal. Also, try to avoid boasting or exaggerating.”

Dr. Foxwell advises that “Applicants must begin to think like professionals. If a photograph is requested in a secondary application, make it a good one, not one that may call your professionalism into question.”

What advice does the review committee have?

“Do your homework. Know what schools are looking for, and work closely with your advisor,” cautions Dr. Foxwell.

Your application needs to be complete and truthful. When it comes to your personal statement, Ms. Tise recommends “There is no secret checklist or formula. Remember, you are the applicant, and we want to know why you think you are a good one.”

Furthermore, Ms. Nicolaysen advises applicants, “Before submitting your application, ask some trusted mentors, friends, or family members to give you feedback about your experiences and essays. You might ask them questions like, ‘How would you describe me based on what you read? Did my essay hold your attention? Was anything confusing? Did you notice any typos?’”

Most importantly, relax. Most applicants have one or two items that they wish they’d changed or perhaps a mistake they think they might have made. If you have further concerns or anxiety over the application process, check out the Aspiring Docs fact sheet on helpful tips for dealing with application anxiety.