

Suggestions for Becoming a Strong Candidate for Professional School

Be motivated

“Why do you want to be a physician/dentist/optometrist/veterinarian?” If you’re thinking about becoming a health care provider, you should have an answer to that question before you even enroll at an undergraduate institution. The answer “I don’t know” raises a red flag, because pre-professional course work, professional school training, and the resulting career itself are all demanding undertakings. The answer “Because I want to help people” is noble, but all health care workers help people, as do people in countless other non-health care careers. Financial gain is a common reason for pursuing a career as a health professional; however, arguably, there are many more lucrative, less stressful careers, often requiring fewer years of training.

Though the drive to become a health care professional can come from any number of sources, many highly motivated students have had a life-changing experience while they or a family member were under the care of a physician. Keep in mind that you are in it for the long haul; admission to professional school is only the beginning of an experience that will last the rest of your life. A successful medical school application will come out of that motivation.

Be engaged in your education

It is no surprise that a strong academic record is an important component of the professional school application. Getting off to a good start in the freshman year is key, including overcoming the sometimes difficult transition from high school to college. Professional school admission committees can forgive of a poor grade or two in the freshman year, as long as performance improves and stays high during the remainder of your education all the way through graduation. Taking anything less than a full course load, multiple failing grades, unofficial withdraw (UW) grades, and repeated courses do not impress members of admission committees.

However, while a competitive GPA is important, academic excellence is more than good grades and memorizing facts just long enough to do well on an exam (the “binge and purge” approach to academics). Retention of concepts and the ability to put ideas together throughout a semester and among courses are indicative of true learning, and health care providers must have those skills. Undoubtedly, this involves hard work. However, academics should be approached as a full-time job, without letting part-time work get in the way. Ask questions during class, visit professors during office hours, and work at it every day. Your ability to think will be honed in the process, and that will pay off when it comes time to take the MCAT, DAT, OAT, or GRE.

Be involved outside of the classroom

Professional school acceptance involves defining yourself as a person as much as a student. Students and their families often use the words “well-rounded,” but that term can be misunderstood. Well-rounded does not mean you should major in a field outside of the sciences just to catch the eye of admission committees. Well-rounded also does not mean you need to be involved in dozens of clubs, organizations, and volunteer activities. It does mean professional schools want their applicants to have talents, interests, and experiences outside the classroom.

Focus on quality over quantity; having a leadership role with responsibility trumps being a “member” of numerous organizations. If you play an instrument, don’t give it up simply because you think you need to focus more on academics. If you have the opportunity to play sports at the college level, consider taking advantage of it.

The ability to excel academically while engaging in other activities speaks volumes about your ability to manage time. Having interests unrelated to your profession will help you find common ground with your colleagues and patients down the road. Outside interests are also excellent for relieving stress associated with undergraduate academics, professional training, and a career as a health professional. Moreover, engaging in outside activities fosters the interpersonal skills valued in health care providers.

Be exposed to the practice of medicine

Professional schools want their applicants have a sense of what they are getting into. Exposure to the field of medicine is another important part of the application. That experience can come in many forms. Some students gain exposure by shadowing physicians. Others volunteer or work in hospital settings or participate in summer internship programs. Some students are even employed as EMTs throughout their undergraduate experience. All of those experiences provide insight into the rewards and challenges associated with a career in the health professions. The attractive applicant is one who can say, “Even though I found out that there are a lot of challenges and frustrations that go along with it, I want to become a doctor now more than ever.”

Be secure with your “Plan B”

Getting accepted to professional school is not easy, and it shouldn't be. Patients expect health care providers to be knowledgeable, skilled, and personable because they will likely have lives in their hands. High admissions standards help ensure that. The reality is that many students who enter pre-professional medical undergraduate programs never apply for admission to professional school due to low grades, low standardized test scores, or a lack of interest in the field. Of those that apply nationally, only about half of medical school applicants are accepted.

But having a “Plan B” does not mean you should give up on your dreams of working in health care; it means you should keep your options open. Having an undergraduate degree in a field that interests you will make that easier. Plus, there are countless avenues to pursue in the health sciences and many professional schools with programs that might be perfect for you. If you don't get in on your first attempt, meet with your advisor to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses and apply again when you're ready. Remember, acceptance into professional school is not the only measure of success in life, but a having a career that makes you happy very well may be.