Applying to Professional School:
A Guide for Health Professions Students

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I. Courses and majors

Your major as an undergraduate is important to you for a variety of reasons. It is the basis of your education that you will grow from as a graduate student and the springboard of a successful GPA. While there are no specific majors your graduate health professions programs will require you to pursue, there are certain core courses that must be included in your undergraduate career. Typically this includes:

- Biology
- Chemistry
- Organic Chemistry
- Physics
- Math – Calculus and statistics, minimum
- English

Along with these basic courses, there are often other requirements depending on your chosen field. For instance, the majority of veterinary and dental schools will want to see a course in biochemistry. Optometry schools will require microbiology, as will physician assistant programs. Be mindful of any required courses that may be unique to certain schools as well.

There will be courses that are required, and those that are recommended. Schedule-wise, required courses are your priority. Required courses need to be completed when the application cycle starts. Recommended courses are something of a "bonus". These courses can be helpful to have some exposure to for entrance exams and graduate school curriculum but they may not necessarily be required. Recommended courses can be in progress when you apply to graduate school.

As stated previously, there is no pre-determined major you must pursue in order to be accepted into graduate health professions programs. When choosing a major, it is important to choose something that is both interesting and challenging to you. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. For example, students pursuing a degree in neuroscience take the science courses needed for admissions as well as a range of psychology courses that offer a unique perspective on human behavior. If that is more interesting to you than a major in Biology, pursue it.

II. Timelines

Students begin the application process the summer following the junior year. The majority of application services will open up in early summer for you to start completing the application itself. There is quite a bit that needs to be completed before the application though. This timeline assumes you will be applying to attend graduate school directly after graduation.

First Year

- Read Preparing for a *Career in the Health Professions*
- Focus on coursework: freshman year DOES matter!

Summer

- DO NOT take science courses over the summer
- Look for paid/volunteer experiences in the health care field. Begin training for any certification you may want (for example, EMT)

Second Year

- Take Organic Chem and Physics to prepare for MCAT's, DAT's, OAT's, etc (if applicable)
- Connect with professors. It's time to be finding research opportunities and building connections for references.
- Look into beginning an internship

Summer

- Again, NO SCIENCE courses over summer
- Begin preparing for entrance exams (MCAT, DAT, GRE, etc)
- Participate in internship, paid/volunteer experience

Third Year

- Complete required courses for admissions
- Attend PHPAC meeting
- Begin preparing portfolio: firm up recommendations, write resume, etc.
- Put together school list and plan possible visits
- Register for and take entrance exams

Summer

- Begin application process
- Continue with health-related experience

Fourth Year

- Submit applications if not already done
- Complete graduation requirements and "recommended" courses
- Attend Interview Workshop to prepare for upcoming graduate interviews

Timing of applications

The application cycle begins the year before matriculation to graduate school. This means that the end of your junior year will mark the beginning of the application cycle. In order to complete your application on time, the following must be complete:

- all required courses
- any paid/volunteer health care experience
- recommendations
- personal statement

For those of who have taken courses at other institutions, copies of your transcripts from those institutions will be needed as well.

Centralized application services will open the application cycle typically in the summer. While the deadline for a particular program may not be until November, that does not mean you should wait until then. The majority of school run their applications on a rolling basis which means first come, first served. Schools will not wait until a November deadline, for example, to make their decisions. In fact, seats will start filling up much sooner than that.

In order to submit your application sooner rather than later, it is important to have the other components of the application packet complete. This means your recommendations should be in your hand or delivered to the application service during the summer (June or July). Adding schools to your list in the fall is fine but do not wait until then to start asking for recommendations. A good rule of thumb is to provide the writer at least four weeks to craft a well-written letter. If you are asking a professor or medical professional that you know has a very busy schedule or will be writing letters for many students, more time should be allowed. Letters of recommendation will be discussed more thoroughly later.

Like recommendation letters, entrance exams must be completed and ready to submit when the application process starts. At least one set of test scores should be provided to your schools upon application. If you are taking your entrance exams again, check the dates that your school will accept. Some places will put a time limit on entrance exams, not letting candidates continue to take the exam and submit those scores for consideration after a certain point in the year.

III. Centralized Application Services

The majority of graduate health professions utilize a centralized application service to streamline their application process. Much like the Common Application for undergraduates, centralized application services serve as a starting point for almost all students applying to graduate programs.

AMCAS – American Medical College Application Service

The American Medical College Application Service, or AMCAS, is for first-year applicants applying to allopathic (MD) medical schools. While not all schools use the AMCAS application, the great majority do. A grade point average is calculated cumulatively as well as a combined Biology/Chemistry/Physics/Math GPA. AMCAS counts ALL courses, including repeated grades and courses taken from any undergraduate institution, even if a degree was not earned. All transcripts, letters of recommendations, and test scores are sent to and distributed through AMCAS.

www.**aamc.org**/students/applying/**amcas**

AACOMAS – American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service

All osteopathic medical schools require applications submitted through AACOMAS. A cumulative grade point average and separate math/science grade point average is calculated through AACOMAS. Only the last instance of a repeated course is counted. MCAT scores and transcripts must be sent to AACOMAS directly. Letters of recommendation are sent to the specific osteopathic medical schools.

https://aacomas.aacom.org/

AADSAS – Associated American Dental Schools Application Service

AADSAS is used by all American and Canadian dental schools. To begin the process, students must register for DENTPIN. This identification number will be used both for the application process as well as registration for Dental Admissions Tests. Expect questions specific to dentistry, including dental and research experience and examples of manual dexterity. AADSAS distributes transcripts and recommendation letters to the specific colleges.

https://portal.aadsasweb.org/

VMCAS – Veterinary Medical College Application Service

The majority of US and international veterinary schools use VMCAS. Applicants are expected to submit the application, all fees, and letters of evaluation directly to VMCAS. Transcripts and

standardized test scores, however, are sent to the schools directly. VMCAS does not allow ANY changes once the application is submitted.

http://www.aavmc.org/vmcas/vmcas.htm

OptomCAS – Optometry Centralized Application Service

All twenty optometry schools participate in OptomCAS. All test scores, letters of evaluation, and transcripts are distributed through OptomCAS. Essays can be individualized for each specific optometry school and applicants are responsible for uploading the correct essay to each school.

http://optomcas.org/

AACPMAS – American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine Application Service

AACPMAS is used by all nine podiatry schools in the United States. All coursework must be included, including repeated coursework and courses taken at other institutions even if a degree was not awarded. Standardized test scores need to be submitted to AACPMAS. This can include MCAT, DAT, or GRE scores depending on the school.

http://www.e-aacpmas.org/

CASPA – Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants

Most physician assistant programs use CASPA. Deadlines vary among the schools so CASPA suggests four to six weeks for processing time to meet all deadlines. GRE's are required for some programs and must be sent directly to the schools, not through CASPA. Students must submit a minimum of three references to CASPA even if their program requires less.

https://portal.caspaonline.org/

PharmCAS – Pharmacy College Application Service

Most pharmacy programs in the United States use the PharmCAS application. Applicants submit all transcripts, letters of evaluation, and test scores through PharmCAS. Students registering for the PCAT, Pharmacy College Admission Test, must register to have their scores submitted to PharmCAS. They will not automatically be sent to the PharmCAS.

http://www.pharmcas.org/

PTCAS – Physical Therapy Centralized Application Service

http://www.ptcas.org/home.aspx

PTCAS is used by many of the physical therapy programs. All coursework is entered as well as GRE scores, if applicable. Letters of reference are also sent through PTCAS. The website details specific program requirements regarding academics, letters of reference, and PT observation hours.

IV. Personal Statement

All programs will expect some sort of personal statement or essay from you with your application. While this piece of the application process may not seem as important as a stellar transcript, do not underestimate the value of this narrative. The personal statement is one of the few pieces of your application that will reflect your unique goals and objectives throughout this process. The personal statement is an opportunity to set yourself apart from the thousands of pieces of paper that flood admissions offices.

One very basic rule to remember when writing your personal statement: edit, edit, edit. Poor spelling and incorrect grammar will ruin even the most captivating personal statement. The admissions team wants to be both interested by your story and impressed by your thoughtful presentation. Take advantage of any writing assistance offered to polish the final draft of your personal statement.

Writing a narrative like a personal statement may be a bit foreign to you. There are many ways to approach the topic and many different avenues to take once you begin writing. A few suggestions to focus your writing:

- Why are you attracted to the profession?
- What is your view of medicine and the profession?
- How have you prepared for both medical school and your career?
- What attributes do you have that will make you a successful doctor/veterinarian/etc.?
- What have you accomplished both personally and professionally that is meaningful to you?

If you have been captivated by your experiences delivering medical care to inner cities, captivate your reader. Action-oriented phrasing paints a much better picture. For example, “I’m good with people” does not have the same imagery as “During my two years as a CNA, I have built wonderful rapport with my patients”. Try to avoid clichés like “I’m good with people” and use more specific examples and straight-forward language. Illustrate your accomplishments and successes in these experiences and show the reader how they have shaped your future plans.

V. Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are an important part of the application packet. These letters are an opportunity to further display your accomplishments and interests. Choosing who will write your letters of recommendations is very important. As you pursue your education, it is important to be creating relationships with faculty. The majority of programs expect to see a letter from at least one faculty person with whom you have a connection with. This faculty person must be able to speak to your successes either in the classroom or laboratory as well as what drives you to pursue your chosen path. It is important that they see you in a professional, mature manner in order to write a letter that is of the most use.

Typically, each health profession will want to see a letter from a member of that field. Letters from doctors, dentists, and veterinarians should be able to speak to some sort of field experience, whether it is shadowing, volunteer, or work experience. Again, these letters should address you as a future professional in the field. The letter writer should be able to speak to your rapport with patients, your ability to adapt to changing situations, your eagerness to learn more about the chosen field.

Often, graduate health professions will request a committee letter. At the University of New England, the Pre-Health Professions Advisory Committee, or PHPAC, writes these committee letters for students applying to a variety of graduate health professions fields. The procedures for the applying to the PHPAC are outlined in the Pre-Health Professions Advisory Committee Workbook, which can be found on the website. Students should plan to apply to the PHPAC the March before their application begins. The PHPAC evaluates students based on grade point average, health care experience, letters of recommendations, a personal statement, and a resume.

It is important to begin requesting letters of recommendation as soon as possible. Professors and health care professionals will need time to craft a well-written letter and submit that letter to the appropriate place. It is also important to make your request early in case you are turned down. There are many reasons an individual may not be willing to write you a letter, including not having enough time to write a good letter. It is important that you, as a professional, respect that decision. Be sure to have more than one person in mind to write your letter and plenty of time to request it of that person.

VI. Experience

Experience in the health care realm is important for a variety of reasons. Immersing yourself in your future profession will help solidify whether or not this is the right path. There may be aspects of the field that are not immediately apparent until you are in the middle of things. Your health care experience also gives you a chance to introduce yourself to professionals in the field. Recommendations from practicing physicians are a key component to your admissions packet as well creating a network of professionals to connect with when you graduate from medical school. Finally, having taken on the challenge of a job or volunteer responsibility while in school shows the graduate programs that you are committed to being in this particular field and able to manage the demands of the position while in school.

There are several ways to go about getting appropriate health care experience. It's important to remember that patient contact can be volunteer or paid work. A job as a certified nurse's assistant (CNA), EMT, or phlebotomist will give you many patient experiences as well as a paycheck.

Internships

Many students find a valuable resource in our internship office. Internships through the CAS Internship Office are credit-bearing experiences that will introduce you to the field in a professional and supervised way. Some internship examples have included dental assistant, genetics counseling assistant, and medical technician. These internships can be done during the school year or the summer in a variety of locations. For many students, this is the first valuable step into the health professions career they hope to pursue. Typically internships are geared more towards shadowing and exposure to the field, not necessarily to accumulate patient contact hours.

Shadowing

For students questioning their direction in the health care field, shadowing can be a valuable opportunity. A shadowing experience with multiple health care practitioners can give you a wide picture of the different pieces that make up the health care field. For example, students unsure about their interest in either physician assistant or osteopathic medicine may shadow multiple practitioners in both fields to find where their interest and passion will truly lie. A "day in the life" of both professionals will help you find focus.

Volunteering

There are organizations willing to take on volunteers to assist in the health care field, though your exposure to patients may be limited. Hospitals and clinics often need volunteers to assist patients. Oncology and dialysis centers, for instance, may be looking for volunteers to help keep patients comfortable during their treatments. Community health centers may use volunteers to

deliver health education to schools and community members. While you may not be following a doctor from room to room, these experiences will expose you to other important aspects of health care.

Employment

The variety of careers that make up the "health professions" seem to be never-ending. While many of you aspire to doctor and dentist, there are many support professionals that play an important role. Certified nurse's assistants, dental assistants, and EMT's are just a few of the areas you can pursue that will serve you in many ways. These medical support professionals are in constant contact with doctors, dentists, veterinarians and the like and they gain a realistic picture of the health care system. You will have exposure to a number of professional contacts and hopefully a chance to pick their brain about what makes a doctor a doctor and if it is where you fit. Having a job in college can be a challenge but it is not without its rewards. The paycheck is of course a benefit but so is the challenge of managing both employment and school work. This level of maturity and responsibility is valued by the graduate programs you will be applying to.

VII. Admissions Testing

There are a variety of admissions tests students take when entering graduate school. It all depends on where you are heading. Not all health professions schools require MCAT's; not all graduate programs require GRE's. It is important for you to know what is expected and applicable to you in the admissions process.

Also important to research are what subjects will be covered by each particular exam. This will inform your study practice. Exams which cover a large amount of science content will most likely require a significant amount of studying. Topics such as perceptual ability on the DAT may be best practiced through art classes such as ceramics or drawing.

There are many resources available to students to prepare for admissions exams. Practice tests, study guides and test prep books can all be very effective means of studying. Many of the exams offer test prep material that is very helpful and often free of charge.

MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)

The MCAT is a standardized, mostly multiple-choice exam. It will test applicants grasp of science concepts, ability to read comprehensively, and problem solve. The MCAT is used for a variety of purposes. All US medical schools, both allopathic and osteopathic, require MCAT. Also, some podiatry programs and veterinary programs will use the MCAT. Be aware that the MCAT's are changing so testing in the future will be different from what students in the past have done. There will be more subjects covered as well as the elimination of the writing section.

For more information, go to: https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/

DAT (Dental Admission Test)

The DAT is a standardized, multiple-choice exam. It will test applicant's general academic ability, knowledge of science concepts, and perceptual ability. In order to register for the DAT, applicants must first obtain a DENTPIN. DAT test dates are not released to the public and can only be accessed after receiving your DENTPIN. All US dental schools require the DAT's.

For more information, go to: http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx

GRE

The GRE General Test is used by a variety of graduate programs. Most applicably, physician assistant and veterinary programs may require GRE scores. Not all of these programs will so it is the applicants responsibility to know whether or not the test is needed. Some masters-level graduate science programs may also require GRE scores. The GRE General Test has three sections: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing.

For more information, go to: http://www.ets.org/gre

OAT (Optometry Admission Test)

All optometry programs in the United States require OAT scores. The OAT covers a survey of natural sciences, reading comprehension, physics and quantitative reasoning. The OAT is a standardized exam.

For more information go to: http://www.opted.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3444

VIII. Interviews

Every graduate health professions program will require an interview as part of the admission process. Typically the interview is the final step before gaining admissions. Applicants are invited to campus to take a tour of the facilities, meet the staff, and also have their interview. Some programs offer a time for prospective students to talk with current students about their experience at the school. There are many different set-up's for interviews and no two schools are exactly the same in the way they operate their interview day. A few of the options for interview formats are:

Panel

- More than one person asking questions
- Prescribed set of questions for every applicant

Free-for-All

- Can be more than one person asking questions
- No prescribed set of questions for each applicant
- More of a "conversation" between you and the interviewers

Partial Blind

- Interviewer will not have seen your entire application packet
  OR
- Two interviewers, only one of which has seen the entire packet

Blind

- Interviewer has not seen the application packet at all

Multiple Mini

- Series of interviews with points awarded by each interviewer
- Interviewee will given different questions/scenarios to discuss with interviewer
- Each interviewee rotates through the every scenario and meets every interviewer

The impression you leave with the admissions committee is very important. This is the final step in the admissions process. Take care to dress appropriately and professionally. Pants and shirts should be clean and ironed. A shirt and tie is appropriate for male interviewees. For females, suit pants or a skirt is acceptable. Skirts should be of appropriate length. You are expected to be on campus for your interview day. The vast majority of programs will not allow interviews online or over the phone; they want you to see the campus and meet the people in the program.

Your behavior during interview day is very important. Be prepared with questions of your own to ask the faculty and students. The school website can't possibly answer everything. Show the committee that you have done your research and are looking for more detail about the school, the program, the match rates, etc.

IX. Financial Aid

The cost of a graduate education necessitates serious planning on the part of the student. The loans can be large and seem unmanageable, but with careful planning and responsible lending you can pay them off. The first step is determining what you will need to borrow and how you can finance your education.

Credit Report

Knowing your credit score and what is on your credit report is very important. Lenders are going to use your credit report to determine whether or not they will give you a loan and if you qualify for lower interest rates. It's important for you to know what is on your credit report before you start applying for loans. For instance, were your undergraduate student loans consolidated correctly? If you have loan that is paid off, is it listed correctly on the report? Your outstanding debt can impact your ability to borrow towards your medical school education. It's very important that your credit report be accurate.

To obtain your credit report and score for free, visit these websites:
http://www.annualcreditreport.com
http://www.equifax.com

FAFSA

Just like undergraduates, graduate schools will expect a completed Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). While there may not be as much help in the form of federal aid, many schools will use the FAFSA information in deciding scholarship information.

The FAFSA form for graduate students is the same as the undergraduate. Go to http://fafsa.ed.gov to get started. Be certain this is the website you are at! Filing your FAFSA should never require any form of payment and they will never ask for credit card information. There are illegitimate websites that may appear to be similar to the FAFSA but will demand payment. Stay away from those sites. You will need to provide tax information for both yourself and your parents on the FAFSA. Even though the federal government will consider you independent from your parents upon entering graduate schools, scholarships may require your parents' information as well.

Forms of Aid

Private Loans

Federal student loans may not cover all of your tuition and other costs for medical school. One common option for covering the rest are private bank loans. Schools often provide a list of institutions that will offer students loans to cover the cost of education. When looking at private loans, pay close attention to the interest rates charged. Know if the interest rate is variable or

fixed, the amount of time you have to pay back the loan, and whether or not it helps you to have a co-signer. These are all important details

Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP)
The US Army offers the Health Professions Scholarship Program option for students interested in the fields of medicine, dentistry, veterinary, nurse practitioner, or clinical or counseling psychology programs. The US Army will pay 100% of tuition, required books, and some fees. Scholarship recipients are obligated to one year of active duty service for every year scholarship money is received. There are additional obligations for residency and fellowship training. Medical school students are obligated to a minimum of two years; dental, optometry, psychology and veterinary are obligated to a minimum of three years.

To qualify for the scholarship, there is an intense application process. A background check and physical examination have to be passed. Also, students are required to attend officer trainings during their time as scholarship recipients.

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS)
The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) trains medical professionals for entry into the US Army, Navy, Air Force, or US Public Health Service. Students receive 100% of tuition paid and are given the salary and benefits of an officer during their four years of training. The minimum service requirement of seven years applies to all branches of the military. Students complete a four to six-week service-specific orientation program before beginning medical school. Like the HPSP, students are required to clear a background check and a physical examination.

National Health Service Corps (NHSC)
The National Health Service Corps offers scholarships to students committed to practicing in areas where there is a shortage of health care professionals. Students pursuing a career in primary care medicine, dentistry, physician assistant, nurse practitioner and mid wifery are eligible to apply to the NHSC program. Upon graduation, students are obligated to practice in approved areas of the country, one year for each year of tuition support. In addition to providing tuition, the scholarship covers related fees and a monthly stipend.