Securing Strong Letters of Recommendation for Medical School

WHO TO ASK AND HOW

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WHO AM I? HOW DO I KNOW WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT?

• I have served on many selection committees.
• I have written many letters of recommendation.
• I have the point of view from both sides of this process.
Importance of Application Data to Admissions Officers at 113 Medical Schools in Their Decisions to Invite Interviewees and Offer Acceptances

Source: *Analysis in Brief*, Sept. 2011; Vol. 11 (6): AAMC

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<th>Invite Interviewees</th>
<th>Offer Acceptances</th>
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<td>GPA: Cumulative science and math (3.7)</td>
<td>Interview recommendation (4.5)</td>
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<td>GPA: Cumulative (3.6)</td>
<td>Letters of recommendation (3.8)</td>
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<td>MCAT Total scores (3.5)</td>
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Color Scheme
- Red = Academic data
- Blue = Experiential data
- Black = Combination of multiple types of data

Rating Scale
- 5 = Extremely Important
- 4 = Very Important
- 3 = Important
- 2 = Somewhat Important
- 1 = Not Important

Note: Mean importance ratings are shown in parenthesis. Application data are presented in descending order of importance to admissions committees’ decisions about which applicants to interview and accept into medical school. The admissions data presented standard deviations ranging from 0.9 to 1.7, indicating variation in importance across medical schools. Data about the importance of “interview recommendations” were not collected at the “invitee interviewees” stage. See supplemental material for a complete list of application data rated, mean importance ratings, and standard deviations.
RESIST THESE TEMPTATIONS:

• Waiting to ask for recommendations until the last possible moment.
• Asking for a recommendation via email.
• Asking for a recommendation hurriedly after class.
• Take ownership and realize that you have more agency in securing a strong letter of recommendation than you think.
WHO TO ASK....

- Faculty who have taught you. You need 2 science letters.
- Others who have supervised your work, service, research, shadowing, etc.
Anyone who knows you well, but has NOT supervised your mastery of the skills needed to be a doctor.

Your mother, and all others!
1. Do your homework ahead of time!

✓ What did you do in the context of the classroom, lab or work environment?

✓ Find samples of your work.

✓ Write 1-2 paragraphs reflecting about your experience with the letter writer. What did you learn?

✓ Emphasize **CORE COMPETENCIES**.
WHAT ARE THESE CORE COMPETENCIES?

**Guidelines**

1. Provide an accurate assessment of the applicant's suitability for medical school rather than advocate for the applicant.
2. Briefly explain your relationship with the applicant:
   - how long you have known the applicant;
   - in what capacity you have interacted (e.g., faculty, pre-medical advisor, supervisor, etc.);
   - and
   - whether you are writing based on direct or indirect observations.
3. Quality is more important than letter length. Focus on the applicant rather than details about the lab, course, assessment, job or institution.
4. Only include information on grades, GPA, or MCAT scores if you are providing context to help interpret them.
   - Grades, GPA, and MCAT scores are available within the application.
5. Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly when describing applicants' suitability for medical school. Consider describing:
   - The situation or context of the behavior
   - The actual behavior(s) you observed
   - Any consequences of that behavior
6. Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. If you make comparisons, be sure to provide context. Include information about:
   - the comparison group (e.g., students in a class you taught, students in your department, co-workers, etc.)
   - your rationale for the final comparison

**Key Areas of Interest**

**A. Unique Contributions to the Incoming Class**
- Describe obstacles that the applicant had to overcome, and how those obstacles led to new learning and growth
- Explain how the applicant may contribute to a medical school diverse, broadly defined (e.g., background, attributes, experiences, etc.)

Note: If you write about any information that could be considered potentially sensitive, confirm with the applicant that she is comfortable with the inclusion of that information.

**B. Core, Entry-level Competencies**

Describe how the applicant has, or has not, demonstrated any of the following competencies that are necessary for success in medical school.

**Thinking & Reasoning Competencies**

Critical Thinking: Uses logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems

Quantitative Reasoning: Applies quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world

Scientific Inquiry: Applies knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems and formulate research questions and hypotheses; is facile in the language of the sciences and uses it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated

Written Communication: Effectively conveys information to others using written words and sentences

**Science Competencies**

Living Systems: Applies knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems

Human Behavior: Applies knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, social, and biological factors that influence health and well-being

**Interpersonal Competencies**

Service Orientation: Demonstrates a desire to help others and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings; demonstrates a desire to alleviate others' distress; recognizes and acts on her responsibilities to society, locally, nationally, and globally

Social Skills: Demonstrates awareness of others' needs, goals, feelings, and the ways social and behavioral cues affect people's interactions and behaviors; adjusts behavior appropriately in response to these cues; and treats others with respect

Cultural Competence: Demonstrates knowledge of social and cultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; shows an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity; recognizes and acts on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engages diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognizes and appropriately addresses bias in themselves and others; interacts effectively with people from diverse backgrounds

Teamwork: Works collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; shares information & knowledge with others and provides feedback; sets team goals ahead of individual goals

Oral Communication: Effectively conveys information to others using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed

**Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others: Behaviors in an honest and ethical manner; cultivates personal and academic integrity; adheres to ethical principles and follows rules and procedures; resists peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourages others to behave in honest and ethical ways; and develops and demonstrates ethical and moral reasoning

Reliability and Dependability: Consistently fulfills obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; takes responsibility for personal actions and performance

Resilience and Adaptability: Demonstrates tolerance of stress or changing environments or situations and adapts effectively to them; is persistent, even under difficult situations; recovers from setbacks

Capacity for Improvement: Sets goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engages in reflective practice for improvement; solicits and responds appropriately to feedback
**2. Ask in a way that makes them want to help you!**

- No email requests.
- Email to schedule a face-to-face appointment.
- Sample email text: *Dear Dr. X, I would like to schedule a meeting with you to talk about my post graduate plans to attend medical school. “May I” come to office hours or is there another way I can meet with you that is more convenient?*
3. Come to the meeting prepared with EVERYTHING the writer needs to produce a strong, detailed letter.

- See waiver instructions
- Use your reflection writing to bridge the awkwardness of the ask.
Sample ask: “I would like to ask you to consider writing me a letter of recommendation for my medical school application.

In order to help you with this decision, I have some written reflections about my experiences with you in the classroom (or other) and how they relate to my decision to be a doctor. Can you read it now, and then can we talk about it to clarify any questions you might have?”
RESULTS...

- If you get, “No, I can’t,” then graciously move on.
- More likely to get, “Yes, I would be happy to do this for you.”

Responsible  Considerate  Prepared  Reflective
Follow-up:

- Email a “thank you.”
- Attach an electronic version of your materials in case they misplace the paper copy.
• Any Questions?