

What It Takes to Be Competitive for BS/MD Programs

The first question I am often asked is this: What does it take to be accepted into one of these EAMPs? Although there is nothing that will guarantee acceptance into an early acceptance program, there are a number of factors that the programs look at in determining who to admit. This chapter will help you understand each of these factors and guide you in the quest to become the strongest possible candidate for an early acceptance program.

First, let's discuss the two factors that are required by many programs to even be considered: grades and test scores.

Grades

The most important factors for admission to an EAMP are your grades and, for some programs, your class rank. The most common requirement is that you be in the top ten percent of your class to be a candidate for an early acceptance program. A few programs require you to be in the top five percent of your class. Some programs have, as an alternative requirement, that you have a certain grade point average to be considered for the program. A minimum 3.8 unweighted GPA is typical.

What happens if a program has a requirement that you be in the top ten percent of your class but your high school does not rank students? In my experience most early acceptance programs will ask for a minimum GPA under these

circumstances, so as to not exclude students coming from high schools that don't rank.

A few early acceptance programs have no minimum GPA or class rank requirement for a student to be considered. These programs, however, tend to be the most selective programs. They have no minimum requirement because they don't want to exclude anyone from possible consideration. Don't be misled into thinking that you do not need high grades and class rank just because a program lists no minimums.

The range of grades that make you competitive for these programs varies. However, the minimum is generally an unweighted GPA of 3.5, and that is for state university programs that are seeking to encourage in-state students to apply for a program. To be the most competitive at the majority of the programs, you will need an unweighted GPA of 3.8 or higher and a class rank, if available, in the top one or two percent of your class.

Test Scores

The second factor required for early acceptance programs is a strong standardized test score. Most programs require a minimum SAT score between 1,350 and 1,450 exclusive of the writing sub-score. Again, these are minimum requirements. To be the most competitive you should have the highest test score possible.

While the majority of colleges super-score the SAT for general admissions, most early acceptance programs do not super-score the SAT for admissions to these programs. (Super-scoring means taking the highest subsection score from multiple test dates and combining the highest scores to make a super-score. For example, suppose you take the SAT twice and the first time receive a 600 verbal and 700 math. The second time you take the SAT you receive a 700 verbal and 620 math. Although the highest score from one sitting is the 1,320 from the second test, a college that super-scores

will combine the 700 verbal from the second test with the 700 math from the first test to give a super-score of 1,400.)

Some programs also state a minimum ACT score for students taking that test. Most commonly, the minimum ACT score is a 30 composite score. Those programs that don't state a minimum ACT convert an ACT score into an SAT score. A few programs prefer to see either the SAT or the ACT test, and they will tell you their preference.

In addition to the SAT or ACT tests, many of the programs also want to see two SAT subject test scores. Some programs tell you specifically what subject test scores they would like to see; but if they don't say, the best option is to take the Math II subject test and either the Chemistry or the Biology subject test. Again, to be most competitive you want to score greater than 700 on each of the subject tests.

All right, you say you have great grades and your tests scores are wonderful. So what are some of the other factors considered for admissions into early acceptance programs?

Research Experience

Most competitive students applying to early acceptance programs have some type of scientific research experience, most commonly in biology or chemistry. This is often as a result of a research opportunity at a university that the student participated in during one of their summers but may also have occurred during the school year. While there are no specific requirements that an applicant have research experience, the early acceptance programs look very favorably on this type of experience, as it further confirms your interest in a scientific field.

Volunteer Activities

Most colleges like to see applicants who have volunteered their time to help others. This is particular true for early acceptance programs, because they are looking for students

who show compassion. There are few better ways to show compassion than by volunteering. Ideally, some of this volunteer effort should occur in a health-related setting such as a clinic, hospital, or nursing home.

There is no minimum number of volunteer hours needed, and it is not necessary to record the number of hours you have as a volunteer. However, it is obvious to anyone if you have not been serious about showing true compassion. This is not about fulfilling a requirement. This is about really showing that you care. I generally advise students that the longer a particular volunteer effort has been going on, the greater the weight it will be given. Ideally, you will have volunteered for more than one year at one or more facilities.

Physician Shadowing

Early acceptance programs also like to see that a student has performed some type of physician shadowing, ideally with more than one physician. Early acceptance programs want to admit only those students who are truly committed to becoming a physician. Many students start college declaring their intent to become physicians; yet the majority of these students drop out along the way for various reasons. Early acceptance programs want to minimize the number of students who change their minds about becoming physicians. One of the ways you can convince the programs you are serious about becoming a physician is to show that you have followed one or more doctors around to see what their typical day is like.

Many doctors are happy to have a student shadow them if you explain that you are committed to attending medical school and want to experience what their actual work is like. Many students follow a doctor around in a clinical setting, but many also are able to make hospital rounds and even observe surgery. It does not matter what type of physician you shadow; but if you think you might have a particular in-

terest in one field of medicine, then see if you can shadow a physician who specializes in that field. There is no minimum amount of time you have to do the shadowing, but the more opportunity you have to shadow a doctor the stronger your application will be.

Extracurricular Activities

Another significant factor in the admissions process for early acceptance programs is the evaluation of the student's extracurricular activities.

There should be a focus on leadership in your activities during the junior and senior year. Early acceptance programs are not interested in students who join many different activities but do not seriously pursue any of them. Rather, a long-term commitment to the activity is what these programs are looking for. Ideally, you should be involved in those activities that interest you the most; and it is best if you have some leadership experience in those activities.

People often ask what the best extracurricular activity is, but the reality is that there is no one right activity. Colleges want to see you involved in activities that are of particular interest to you. These may be activities related to school, but they can just as easily be activities outside of school. The focus of these activities, however, is often different for early acceptance students than for students applying only to highly selective colleges.

The most selective colleges are looking for students who are specialists in a particular activity. These are the students who have focused all of their interest on a select few activities—the student whose life revolves around the clarinet, the stage, or the chemistry lab.

Early acceptance programs, on the other hand, tend to favor students who have a somewhat broader background. You might be involved in the band, student government, and science Olympiad all at the same time. As long as you have

been seriously involved in each of your activities, you will be a strong candidate. What does it mean to be seriously involved? It means that you have been involved with the activity through most, if not all, of your high school career, devoting substantial time to the activity and resulting in a leadership position of some sort.

One difference with the extracurricular activities for those students interested in early acceptance programs is the focus on health-related activities. This might include involvement in, or the founding of, a chapter of Future Doctors of America, involvement with science Olympiad, or other activities that have some relationship with the health care field.

Another way in which the focus of extracurricular activities differs for early acceptance programs is the focus on volunteer effort. While all highly selective colleges like to see students who have a compassionate side, this is particularly important for students applying to early acceptance programs. Being a physician will pay well, but there is also a huge commitment to caring for others that is needed to be a good physician. Medical schools, and early acceptance programs in particular, are not looking for the student whose sole goal in becoming a doctor is to make lots of money. They are seeking the student for whom the practice of medicine is a passion. Substantial volunteer effort is a great way to show the medical school that you have the compassion needed to be a great physician.

Early acceptance programs like all volunteer activity, but they particularly like to see involvement in volunteer activities that are health-related. I have had many students who volunteered in nursing homes. Some of these students went to the nursing home on a regular basis to visit with residents of the home. Others went to play musical instruments, read books to those who are vision-impaired, or help with feeding residents.

But nursing homes are not the only place you can volunteer. Many hospitals will gladly work with a student who

wishes to volunteer in some capacity. This may involve helping in a gift shop or helping direct people who are visiting the hospital. A few students of mine have even had the opportunity to volunteer in an emergency room or an outpatient surgery area. Of course, it is more interesting if you can be in an area where patients might be, but don't worry if that is not possible.

Many students, in completing the list of extracurricular activities on the application, want to list every activity they have been involved in since they were young. This is not a good idea. You want to focus your extracurricular activities on those that show your interest in health care, that highlight your leadership, or that reflect those activities that you have been seriously involved with. That one hour that you rang the bell for the Salvation Army should not be listed. Although it is a volunteer activity, listing this type of limited involvement activity either looks like you don't have enough serious volunteer activities or you are shallow and pandering. Neither is the impression you want to give a medical school admissions committee.

There are two basic ways to provide the colleges with information about your extracurricular activities. The most common is through the activity list of the Common Application. The Common Application provides room for twelve activities. For each activity you can list the years devoted to the activity, the number of hours per week, the number of weeks per year, your position in the activity, and a brief statement of what the activity involves. You can also indicate if this is an activity that you intend to continue in college.

There are several advantages to using the activity list of the Common Application as your only list of activities. First, it is simple. You don't have to worry about how to structure a list of activities; the list is ready for you to complete. And because of the limited space available, you have to choose only those activities that are most important to you and to be succinct in describing each activity.

The second advantage is that the activity list on the Common Application makes it simple for the college admissions reader to review all of your activities at a glance. Given that a typical application only gets fifteen to twenty minutes of review for the entire application, having a convenient list of the most important activities is helpful. For most students I recommend that they use the Common Application list for activities as their exclusive list.

However, there is another option that is appropriate for some students. For some students with a large number of strong activities, the supplemental activities résumé may be appropriate. This supplemental résumé is a replacement for the activities list on the Common Application. The major advantage of the supplemental résumé is that it lets you provide greater detail about specific activities and it allows the listing of a greater number of activities. Many counselors encourage all of their students to submit a supplemental résumé rather than use the application list of the Common Application. While this may seem like a wise idea, I believe that it actually works to the disadvantage of many students.

There are several issues that should be considered by the student who is considering using a supplemental résumé. First, remember that a college admissions officer has limited time to look at the entire application. As I mentioned earlier, fifteen to twenty minutes is typical for the time to review an application.

Now imagine that you have just submitted a three-page résumé of activities. If the admissions officer looks at your entire résumé, they will have that much less time to review the rest of your application, including your grades, classes, test scores, and essays. What typically happens in these situations is that the admissions officer spends the usual amount of time looking at your grades, classes, test scores, and essays. They then take the limited amount of time they have left to scan over your résumé. If the résumé is too detailed, or too long, the admissions officer may miss some of

your activities just because they don't have time to review each application in that kind of detail. You may also annoy the admissions reader because they are trying to be fair to everyone whose application they have to read. If they feel that they have to spend more time on your résumé than on some other student's, it will generally not help, and may hurt, your chance of admissions.

The second factor to consider if you are thinking about doing a supplemental résumé is whether you really have enough activities to justify such a résumé. There are some students that have an incredible amount of serious extracurricular activities that cannot be accounted for by the Common Application. But this is the unusual circumstance.

The third factor to consider is how it looks on your application that you are not able to write succinctly to describe your activities. Colleges using the Common Application do so intentionally to make sure that they get the information they require. Colleges are not pushing the Common Application to increase the number of listings for activities or to give more space for the description of the activities. That is because they know that for most students, the allowed space is sufficient to list the most important activities.

If you really believe you have too many activities for the Common Application, or that you need to provide more detail on your activities than the space on the Common Application allows, try to limit the supplemental résumé to one page of single spaced type. Follow the same format as the Common Application so that similar information is included in your supplemental résumé. Choose an ordinary serif typeface that is easily read on paper or computer monitor, such as Century Schoolbook (what you are reading now) or Garamond, in 12-point size. If space is tight, you can use Times New Roman, instead. Do not try to demonstrate your creativity by selecting a script font or an informal font such as Comic Sans. Doing so will detract from the image you are presenting.

Remember that the Common Application provides a Short Answer Essay that allows you to “elaborate on one of your activities (extracurricular, personal activities, or work experience).” If you just have one activity that needs more information than you can provide on the Common Application activity list, provide that information in this essay rather than using a supplemental résumé.

Finally, the Common Application also provides a space for you to provide any additional information that you would like the college to know about. This is another space that can be used to expand on your activities without using a supplemental résumé.

Recommendations

Most EAMPs require two teacher recommendations and a counselor recommendation. For most colleges, recommendations have little influence on the admissions decisions. However, in programs that are extremely competitive, such as EAMPs, any small advantage should be used.

To get the best recommendations from your teachers and counselor you want to make sure that they have information on all of your background. One easy way is to provide them with a résumé. Remember that résumé you wanted to put together for the application? Use that résumé instead to provide complete information to your recommenders.

Ideally, the recommendation will focus on those issues that are important to an EAMP. Comments about your maturity, your helpfulness in the classroom, your volunteer activities, and your leadership are all helpful. You want to be sure that your recommender is aware of your commitment to attending medical school, and you may ask them to comment on this focus. Familiarity of the recommender with any extended health care volunteer activities would also be helpful.

Students often do not have a strong relationship with their high school counselor because the counselor has a

large number of students to work with. If that is true of your counselor, you need to make every effort to get to know your counselor as well as possible before they need to write your recommendation. Colleges understand that high schools often have high counselor-to-student ratios so will not penalize you if you don't get a detailed recommendation from your counselor. But, if you can get a good recommendation from your counselor, it is one more small step in helping the application reader understand who you are.

Students often wish to provide more recommendations than are asked for by the college. It is the rare situation when it is appropriate to send additional recommendation letters. Colleges ask for the information that they think they need to make a reasoned decision. If they wanted more recommendations, they would ask for them. The only time it is appropriate to provide an additional recommendation is if that recommender can offer a perspective on an important aspect of your background that is not addressed elsewhere in the application.

Final Thoughts

Colleges and in particular medical schools are not just looking for the brightest students. Yes, you need the grades and test scores to be eligible to apply to BS/MD programs. But, even the strongest students need to show more to be successful in applying to these programs. You also need to show that you have the passion to be a physician and the compassion to be a good doctor. You need to show that you have the maturity to handle the pressure of medical school and the life of a physician. You must communicate that you are conscientious but also personable.

How do you show that you have these personality characteristics? This information should come out in all aspects of your application. Your college and medical school essays, your activity list, your recommendations, and your interview

all are opportunities to communicate who you are beyond your transcript. As you proceed through your application to a BS/MD program do not lose sight of who you are and how you might communicate that to the programs.