

Frequently Asked Questions for Prospective Premed/Pre-Health Students

Brandeis University Office of Academic Services

What does “pre-health” mean?

Pre-Health is an umbrella term for the diverse careers in the health professions that students may pursue, from acupuncture to veterinary medicine. Although most Brandeis students pursue medical studies, we hope that students are open-minded to learn about other potential career paths in the health fields and beyond.

What’s the “pre-health track”?

You will hear Brandeis students referring to the pre-health track. Since pre-med/health is not a major, students call it a “track” to signify the fact that there are certain courses you have to take in preparation for health professional schools. This track, however, is very flexible in how you complete it – you’re welcome to hop on or off at any time, but you may want to consult with the pre-health advisor if you decide to do so.

What services does Brandeis University offer to its pre-health students?

Whatever you’re looking for, we’re willing to help you find it! Aside from the myriad support structures and services offered to all students at Brandeis, here are some specific to incoming pre-health students:

- **Health Professions Advisors** – two professional staff members whose sole job is to advise students as they clarify their health professional goals and help them reach these goals, in part by assisting them in the health professional school application process.
- **Roosevelt Fellows** – peer advisors who work specifically with first-year students on any academic concerns. Each year, some of these Fellows are also premed/pre-health students who can give you their perspectives on the courses, application processes, etc.
- **Pre-Health, Pre-Dental, and Pre-Veterinary Societies** – student-run organizations that provide support, resources and programming for fellow pre-health students.
- **First-Year Info Sessions** – sessions offered every September to give students a basic understanding of what it means to be pre-health.
- **Pre-Med/Pre-Health Student Handbook** – a fifty-plus page reference guide given to students at the Info Sessions full of advice on preparing for, applying to, and getting accepted to health professional schools.
- **Annual sponsored events** – first year and sophomore information sessions, course selection advising, application workshops for juniors and seniors, presentations by admissions representatives from health professional schools, guest practitioners from various health professions.

What services does Brandeis University offer to students applying to health professional schools?

As students (and alumni) navigate the complex process of applying to schools, additional support is provided by the following resources:

- **Premedical Board Advisor** – The Board of Premedical Advisors is composed of faculty and administrators who have a special interest in working with pre-health students as they apply to schools. Each applicant is assigned to an advisor who will work with the student individually to develop various aspects of the application, and help the student assess strengths and weaknesses as an applicant. The applicant’s advisor also helps prepare the student for the Board interview and assists in creating the composite letter of recommendation (see below).
- **Workshops** – A general Applicant Workshop outlines the process of applying to schools and utilizing the services of the Board of Premedical Advisors. Additional workshops are available on topics including Demystifying the Standardized Application; Writing the Personal Statement; Selecting Schools; and Interviewing.
- **Board Interview** – The Board interviews each applicant in a low-stress, twenty-minute session. The interview helps the Board become familiar with the applicants, and provides the applicants with interview practice, and feedback on strengths and weaknesses of their candidacies.
- **Composite Letter of Recommendation** – The letter of recommendation from the Board is often called a composite letter since it incorporates information from multiple sources, including individual letters of recommendation. Health professions schools prefer this sort of letter to individual letters, which may not be as comprehensive.
- **Mock Interviews** – When students are invited for interviews at health professions schools, they can arrange a mock interview session to practice and get feedback on their interview skills.
- **Tufts Early Assurance Program** – Through an agreement with Tufts University School of Medicine, Brandeis students can apply in their sophomore year to gain an assured seat in medical school. More details are below.

What are health professional schools looking for in applicants?

Schools are interested in well-rounded, mature, and intellectually curious applicants with excellent academic abilities, strong interpersonal skills, clear motivation for medicine, and demonstrated compassion and concern for others. I highlight five factors for admission to health professions programs: 1) a well-rounded, high-achieving academic orientation (with competitive GPA and standardized test scores); 2) meaningful co-curricular activities; 3) positive, specific letters of recommendation; 4) deliberate timing in the application process; and 5) strong performance in the interview.

ACADEMICS **What are the course requirements for admission to health professional programs?**

Most medical and dental schools require one year each of lectures and labs in General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Biology, and Physics, one year of English, and one to two semesters of college-level Mathematics. Some schools now require biochemistry. Additionally, for the new MCAT in 2015, one semester of Biochemistry along with Introduction to Psychology and Introduction to Sociology will be required. Other health professional schools' requirements differ, especially for students in veterinary medicine, so contact the pre-health advisor early to explore these requirements.

Can I use AP credit to fulfill my premed requirements?

It depends on the schools and the courses. Many schools accept AP credit to fulfill all or part of the Math and English requirement. If you use AP credit to place out of an introductory science course, it is in your best interest to "replace" it with an upper level course with laboratory in that discipline. So, if you AP out of General Chemistry, you may consider Physical Chemistry or Biochemistry as advanced courses.

How does the English requirement work?

Brandeis' current offering of a University Writing Seminar (UWS), paired with an additional, non-science writing intensive course will fulfill most schools' English requirement. An English literature course would not have to be writing intensive to meet the requirement.

Do I have to major in a science?

No. Beyond the required science courses, a broad humanities and liberal arts background is encouraged and expected, as is majoring in the field that most interests you.

What do most pre-health students major in?

Quite a few students major in the sciences because that's where much of their interest lies, but applicants to health professional school each year come from diverse disciplines. The Health: Society, Science and Policy (HSSP) major is gaining popularity, as it provides an interdisciplinary study of health and health care that interests many pre-health students. Neuroscience and Biology are also very popular.

Can I study abroad and be pre-health?

Yes, it's a wonderful experience that shouldn't be missed, if it interests you. An overseas experience can complement and enhance both your general program of study and your pre-health interests. Moreover, fluency in a language other than English and cross-cultural experience can enhance your application to a health professional school. Generally, students work with advisors to plan their pre-health prerequisite courses around their study abroad experience.

What kinds of grades will I need to be accepted?

The higher the better, obviously, but a good balance of competitive GPA and strong performance on the MCAT will serve you well. Currently, with an average in the 3.5-3.6 range, an MCAT at or above 30, and impressive non-academic experiences, you can consider yourself competitive. However, there are many individual factors that come into play in the admissions process, and there is no magic formula that will get you accepted, or rule you out as a candidate. Health professional schools are aware of the quality of our students and academic programs, which can work in your favor as an applicant.

TESTS

What is the MCAT?

The MCAT is the standardized test required by all medical schools. It is a full-day exam that has multiple-choice sections on verbal reasoning, biological sciences, physical sciences, as well as a writing sample. You may take the MCAT when you have completed the chemistry, biology and physics requirements. Similar tests are administered for most health professions. The new MCAT in 2015 will also test biochemistry and introductory concepts in psychology and sociology.

What score do I need on the MCAT to get into medical school?

Again, there is no magic formula. A score of 30 (10 out of 15 in each of the three multiple-choice sections) is generally considered competitive, but it's only one factor of many for gaining admission.

Does Brandeis University offer test-prep classes?

The Kaplan and Princeton Review test prep services offer classes on or near campus, and Brandeis students are eligible to receive discounts, but Brandeis University is not affiliated with either service, and does not endorse one over the other. Students should research what these courses offer, and how well this will complement their study habits and learning styles. Some students do better with one or the other, and some students do fine by saving their money and creating a self-study program. It's a matter

of personal preference – but make sure that you do study!

ACTIVITIES **What kinds of co-curricular experiences should I seek?**

You should pursue anything that interests you. Medical schools are interested in students who have been active contributors on campus, and who have a range of interests. You should choose a few things to do meaningfully and well, and always focus on your academics first.

Do I need to have medically-related experiences?

It is important that you involve yourself meaningfully in a medical setting, to show medical schools that you have observed medical practice first-hand. Students often do this through volunteer work in hospitals and clinics, summer jobs, internships, formal pre-health summer programs, or shadowing physicians in their private practices. We advise students to complete 100 hours of clinical volunteering while in college.

Was volunteering in high school enough?

It's a good start, and you're encouraged to draw on these experiences and the people that you met through them to gain even more clinical experience as a college student. Medical schools will be looking for additional clinical hours during your college years.

Are there opportunities to volunteer in a hospital during the school year?

Yes – students may volunteer at area hospitals including Newton-Wellesley, Brigham and Women's, Mass General, and many others. There are also many opportunities to care for others in health-oriented positions, such as hospices, assisted living facilities, and groups that work with people with developmental disabilities. Sometimes students find it easier, though, to devote 20 hours per week during a summer vacation, or volunteer full-time during a winter break, than to negotiate classes, studying, other activities, and volunteering during the academic year.

Brandeis also sponsors BEMCo, a student-run emergency medical service that works with the health center to provide 24-hour care for the campus community. All students who work for BEMCo first gain EMT certification through a class offered on campus. EMT certification is a state certification and can be transferred to other states by taking their exam.

What else can I do to serve the community?

Community service is a means to demonstrate your concern and compassion for others, and gives you an opportunity to work with those different from yourself, which is important in getting ready to see patients of all backgrounds. Brandeis student organizations such as the Waltham Group can help to connect you with additional volunteer service projects that meet your interests. Community service does not have to be medically related. Health professional schools prefer fewer commitments over time (one semester or a year), rather than many short-term experiences.

Do I need to do research to get into medical school?

As with any other experience, try it if you think you will enjoy it, but don't do it just because you think it'll give you an "edge." Health professional schools want you to engage in activities that interest you, while helping you develop the skills and values that will improve your practice as a health care provider. That said, working in a faculty member's lab, or in an intensive summer experience, can provide you with insight into the world of research, hands-on skills, and strong letters of recommendation.

LETTERS

Who will write my letters of recommendation?

When you apply to medical school, you will need to have three to six letters of recommendation from faculty and others (such as research mentors and supervisors in clinical work) who can speak to your candidacy and readiness to become a health professional. All of these letters are submitted to the Office of Academic Services, and a composite letter of evaluation is written for you.

What if I don't know any of my professors well enough to ask for a letter?

You're lucky enough to be a prospective student, so you can make sure that, by the time you're applying, this isn't the case! It may seem intimidating at first to walk into office hours and start conversations with faculty, but the more practice you gain, the easier it will be. Starting in your first semester, make it a goal to get to know one faculty member well, and by the time you apply, you'll have developed relationships with at least six faculty members, if not more.

Can you describe the composite letter of recommendation?

The composite letter speaks to your unique characteristics and experiences that have prepared you for health professional school, and a career in the health professions. We draw on multiple sources to paint this picture, including: the Board interview; letters of recommendation from faculty and other individuals; an essay that you'll write and submit as part of your application; co-curricular activities in which you have been involved; and your academic record. This also gives us an opportunity to note things that may not be readily apparent about your candidacy, such as providing background on an anomalous academic performance, or highlighting an award that you received with which the Admissions Boards may not be familiar.

TIMING

When should I apply to medical school and how do I go about it?

Ideally, you should not apply until you are certain that you're ready to make a lifetime commitment, and are a strong enough candidate to merit serious consideration by your chosen schools. Pragmatically, you should have:

- Completed (and done well in) all pre-requisite courses.
- Gotten to know enough faculty, staff, and others to garner at least three strong, positive letters of recommendation.
- Gained some clinical experience in your chosen field.

Once you determine the year in which you plan to matriculate, it is to your advantage to apply as early as possible. Many schools have rolling admissions and begin admitting students even before the deadline for applications has passed, so get your name in early! Medical schools begin accepting applications on or near June 1st for matriculants to the following year's class; that is, about fifteen months before you hope to begin your professional school program. So, if you're a high school senior, class of 2011, plan to graduate in four years from undergrad (class of 2015), and plan to go directly to medical school (class of 2019!), you'll begin preparing your application in Spring 2014. Ideally, you should complete the application process for medical school before the end of the summer, be interviewing in the Fall and early Spring, and be accepted before you graduate. Drop me an email if you'd like me to go over the timeline for other health professional schools.

Also, the earlier you start the application process within your application year, the sooner we can begin writing your composite letter of recommendation. You'll learn more about this in the Applicant Workshops as you prepare to apply.

Is it okay to take time off between graduating from Brandeis and medical school?

Yes – it's encouraged! Many applicants opt to take at least a year between graduation from college and matriculation to health professional school. This allows students to spread out the premed requirements, to have more flexibility to study abroad and engage in co-curricular activities, to gain work experience, and just to give themselves a rest between two rigorous academic endeavors. The average age of a medical school matriculant is 24. Brandeis students reflect the national trend of approximately 50% of applicants taking a glide year or two. All of the services that Brandeis offers are available to you as an alumnus for five years.

BA/MD

Can you tell me more about the Tufts Early Acceptance BA/MD Program?

Students typically apply to Tufts University School of Medicine through this program in their sophomore year. If they are accepted, and continue to do well in their remaining undergraduate coursework, they are assured a seat in the class. Competitive applicants have a minimum 3.6 GPA in their science/math courses, and preferably have some clinical experience. More information can be found at <http://www.tufts.edu/med/admissions/>.

STATISTICS

How do Brandeis University students do on the MCAT?

In 2010 the national mean MCAT score for students admitted to allopathic medical schools was 29.3, while the mean score for admitted Brandeis students was 31.2. In the preceding three years, the national mean score for admitted MD students was 29 while the Brandeis mean for accepted students was 30.6.

What percentage of Brandeis University applicants get into health professional schools?

Brandeis' acceptance rate for students to medical, dental and veterinary schools is around 74%, well above the national averages. More importantly, our students feel well-prepared for their professional school, and do well once they're accepted.

ADVISING

When should I meet with the Director of Pre-Health Advising?

Visit Judith Hudson, Director of Pre-Health Advising, or Surella Seelig, Pre-Health Advisor, early and often! Attend a "new to the pre-health track" information session in September when you arrive on campus, and then bring your follow-up questions to an individual appointment.

Where can I find you?

The Pre-Health Professions Advising Office is located in the Office of Academic Services, Usdan, Room 130, also home to Study Abroad, Disability Services and Support, the Class Advisors, the Student Support Services Program, Scholarships and Fellowships Advising, and the Roosevelt Fellows – all

important resources for you to know about and utilize!

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