Health Professions: Frequently Asked Questions

The following information is provided in response to a relatively comprehensive set of questions frequently asked of the Office of Academic Advising (OAA) regarding health professions.

UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

Question: Is there a pre-medical major at Rice?

No. Medical and dental schools in the United States have limited their entrance requirements to a few basic subjects that are part of a broad undergraduate education and accept students with a variety of majors. Candidates for medical and dental schools (as well as other allied health graduate programs) can pursue any major while taking elective courses to fulfill the necessary prerequisites. Rice encourages students to pursue whatever major area of study is of most interest to them. The OAA helps guide students in their course selection and identification of appropriate activities to ensure preparedness for graduate programs. Additionally, students interested in health professions support one another through pre-professional organizations which coordinate activities to help students explore and prepare for a career in healthcare.

Question: Is it necessary to major in a science discipline in order to apply to medical/dental school?

It is definitely not necessary to select a basic science major when pursuing medical or dental school. Likewise, selecting a non-science major will not diminish your ability to gain admission. Former Rice students now attending Texas and out-of-state medical and dental schools have majored in all majors offered at Rice. Students exploring health professions can major in any discipline of interest as long as they also complete the prerequisite coursework.

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) states the following concerning choice of undergraduate major/courses:

“Medical schools recognize the importance of a strong foundation in the natural sciences—biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics—and most schools have established minimum course requirements for admission. These courses usually represent about one-third of the credit hours needed for graduation. This approach deliberately leaves room for applicants from a broad spectrum of college majors, including those in the humanities and social sciences. No medical school requires a specific major of its applicants or matriculants. Admission committee members are aware that medical students can develop the essential skills of acquiring, synthesizing, applying, and communicating information through a wide variety of academic disciplines. Nevertheless, many premedical students choose to major in a scientific discipline. Ideally, they do so because they are fascinated by science and perceive that such a major can be the foundation for a variety of career options. Choosing science primarily to enhance one’s chances for admission to medical school is not in a student’s long-term best interest. Medical school admission committees seek students whose intellectual curiosity leads them to a variety of disciplines and whose intellectual maturity assures that their efforts are persistent and disciplined. In fact, practicing physicians often recommend that, during their college years, premedical students take advantage of what might be their last opportunity for the study of non-science areas (music, art, history, and literature) that might become avocational interests later in life.”
Question: What are the medical/dental school course requirements?

With few exceptions, most medical and dental schools require completion of the following courses. Students will need to create an academic plan to accommodate these courses alongside their requirements for graduation. These prerequisites must be taken for a grade, not pass/fail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Required</th>
<th>Recommended</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Required Lab course</th>
<th>Hours</th>
</tr>
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<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>12&lt;n</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Any ENGL course, FWIS 101-199, and HUMA 101 or 102 will satisfy this requirement.
2 Most Texas medical schools require additional upper-level biology coursework (300- & 400-level course offerings).
3 Dental schools require additional coursework in microbiology. BIOC 424 will satisfy this requirement.
4 A significant number of medical schools have added at least three hours of this discipline as a requirement. Others strongly recommend.

Though many schools will accept Advanced Placement credit that was transferred to your undergraduate transcript, there are those schools that will not. Students should check the requirements for each school of interest (see next question on AP). The specific requirements for each medical school can be found in the yearly publication from the AAMC, Medical School Admission Requirements, which can be purchased from the AAMC website: www.aamc.org. Likewise, the ADEA publishes the Official Guide to Dental Schools, which can be purchased from the ADEA website: www.adea.org.

Question: Should I use Advanced Placement (AP) credits to fulfill my prerequisites?

This is a question that must be answered on a case by case basis. Only a student can know if they have truly learned the information presented in an Advanced Placement course sufficient to perform well in upper-level coursework and on professional school admission tests. Students confident in their mastery and retention of the material should also consider the following:

- Not all medical and dental schools accept AP credit. However, AP credit will satisfy some, but not all, requirements for many schools. The OAA website features a convenient summary document titled “AP Credit Chart – Allopathic Medicine”. Still, students should check websites or contact admission committees to determine each school’s current AP policies.
- There is no AP credit granted for general biology laboratory. Students need to complete at least 2 credit hours of biology lab during their undergraduate tenure.
- If a student chooses to rely on a large number of AP credits to satisfy prerequisites, it leaves little for an admission committee to assess.
- Therefore, if a student satisfies the general biology and/or general chemistry requirements with AP credits, they should complete at least 2 additional semesters of upper-level coursework in each discipline. There are several reasons for this:
To reinforce what was learned in the general level courses;
- To establish capability of performing well at the college level in each discipline;
- To confirm mastery of the foundational material presented in each of the general courses for which the student has AP credit; and
- To satisfy the requirement at those schools that do not accept AP credit in those disciplines.

**Question:** Can I take prerequisites over the summer at Rice or another school?

Yes. It is possible to take prerequisites over the summer as long as they are taken at a reputable four-year institution. Keep in mind, it is not recommended that you take too many of the prerequisites at a different institution and during the summer months. Summer courses often squeeze a semester of work into five weeks. Such a short time does not always foster the level of mastery you should achieve in the course in order to perform well in upper-level coursework and on professional school admission tests.

Students who take a course during the summer and at another institution should complete the Undergraduate Transfer Credit Request Form and secure approval from the appropriate Transfer Credit Advisor prior to enrollment in that course if the student needs to satisfy degree credit and/or major requirements at Rice. Courses transferred to Rice will not be calculated into your Rice grade point average. However, professional schools will use these grades when calculating your overall GPA.

**Question:** What if I'm not doing well in one of my prerequisites?

There are many reasons why students do not perform at their best, but there are tremendous resources at Rice to help. However, it is the student’s responsibility to take initiative when they are struggling in a course, and their greatest mistake is to wait too long before seeking academic assistance. Students should consult their professor and see an advisor to discuss options at the first sign of struggling with understanding concepts or performing less than ideal in a course. For more information, view the Academic Support tab on the OAA website: [http://oaa.rice.edu/academic-support/](http://oaa.rice.edu/academic-support/).

**Question:** Is it discouraged to take a course using the pass/fail grade mode?

Yes. Many medical and dental schools will not consider any pass/fail courses as fulfilling their prerequisites. Even in cases where it is not absolutely prohibited, it is inadvisable to take prerequisite courses pass/fail. A "D" grade counts as a "Pass" in a pass/fail course, and a "D" grade is probably what skeptical admission committee members will assume was earned in the course. Courses that are not prerequisites and in accordance with the rules in Rice’s General Announcements can be taken pass/fail.

**CO-CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES**

**Question:** In addition to taking the courses required for admission, what should I be doing during semesters and during summer breaks?

Extracurricular activities are an important part of medical and dental school applications. Some good examples include health-related activities, especially clinical observation experiences, volunteer opportunities, independent research, study abroad, and jobs in the Texas Medical Center. It can also be quite helpful to seek out leadership positions. Whatever endeavors are chosen, it’s important to commit to them for a period of time to demonstrate dedication and a sustained effort. For volunteer and internship
opportunities, students should explore Rice’s Center for Civic Leadership (https://ccl.rice.edu/) and Center for Career Development (https://ccd.rice.edu/home/).

**Question:** When is a good time to start gaining clinical observation experience?

It’s never too early to start gaining clinical experience. While there is no set number of required hours, clinical experience is absolutely necessary for students to learn about healthcare and to show commitment to a career in the field. Shadowing a physician or dentist demonstrates that the student has taken the initiative to gain first-hand experience. Direct interaction with patients through work or sustained volunteering in a hospital or clinic is also very helpful. Even students with strong grades and recommendations are sometimes not admitted to medical or dental school if they have had no contact with patients and physicians or dentists in the years immediately prior to applying.

Clinical experience can be obtained by e-mailing a physician or dentist in a small practice and asking if they have space and time available for a student observer. A good place to start is often with a student’s own physician or dentist. At large hospitals, like those in the Texas Medical Center, students must apply for clinical observerships. It may take several weeks to submit and process all of the application materials, including a background check and vaccination record, so students should begin well in advance. Through LEAD 399, pre-medical students can obtain credit hours for a physician shadowing experience.

**Question:** Are Emergency Medical Services (EMS) at Rice sufficient for gaining clinical experience?

It is natural for pre-medical students to be interested in participating in organizations related to emergency medicine and possibly becoming certified as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). However, many medical schools seem to want applicants to have had contact specifically with physicians and hospitals. Emergency medical services are great supplements, but not substitutes, for that experience, at least in the eyes of some admission committees.

**Question:** How do I obtain research experience?

The easiest way to obtain research experience is to contact a Rice professor about volunteering in their lab. Most professors have a website describing their current research agenda. Research experience can also be obtained at the Texas Medical Center. Read about faculty research interests at Baylor College of Medicine and The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, then e-mail faculty members directly, including a resume and a request to meet and discuss their research.

Students can often earn credit hours for their research. For example, the BIOC 310 website explains the process for obtaining credit and provides tips for students seeking research opportunities in biochemistry: www.bioc.rice.edu/bios310. Note that it is not necessary to conduct research in the natural sciences. Ideally, a student will pick any lab that piques their interest, and research courses are offered in most disciplines. For additional research-related opportunities, explore the Center for Civic Leadership website: https://ccl.rice.edu/students/learn/undergraduate-research/.
**Question:** Can I still study abroad? Is it okay to take prerequisites at an international institution?

Absolutely. With careful academic planning, any student can study abroad and successfully apply to medical or dental school. In most instances, this type of experience will enhance your resume and will not detract from a student’s major focus. However, having AP credit or majoring in a humanities or social science field usually gives students more flexibility. Students can explore study abroad opportunities and even search for programs focused on medicine and global health on Rice’s Study Abroad Office website: [http://abroad.rice.edu/](http://abroad.rice.edu/).

It is not recommended that students take prerequisites abroad. Many medical and dental schools will not accept credits from international institutions. It is difficult to find courses at foreign universities that fulfill exact science requirements for schools in the United States, and admission committees usually want to see the 8 minimum lab requirements on a transcript from a U.S. college or university.

**HEALTH PROFESSIONS OPTIONS**

**Question:** What is the difference between a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) and a Medical Doctor (MD)?

In addition to studying all of the typical subjects student physicians must master, osteopathic medical students take approximately 200 hours of training in osteopathic manipulative medicine. This system of hands-on techniques helps alleviate pain, restores motion, supports the body’s natural functions, and influences the body’s structure to help it function more efficiently. Nearly one in five medical students in the United States is attending an osteopathic medical school.

While the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) accredits the 144 U.S. medical schools that award the M.D. degree, the American Osteopathic Association’s (AOA) Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation (COCA) accredits the 30 colleges that award the D.O. degree. For more information about the American Osteopathic Association, visit: [http://www.osteopathic.org/](http://www.osteopathic.org/). For more information about the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, visit: [http://www.aacom.org](http://www.aacom.org).

**Question:** What are combined degree programs?

Combined degree programs include:

- MD/JD: combined degree in medicine and law
- MD/MBA: combined degree in medicine and business
- MD/MPA: combined degree in medicine and public administration
- MD/MPH: combined degree in medicine and public health
- MD/PhD combined degree in medicine and research
- MD/DDS: combined degree in medicine and oral and maxillofacial surgery

To find what programs are available at a particular medical school, students should refer to their website. Schools that offer MD/JD, MD/MBA, MD/MPH, and MD/PhD combined degrees can be found in the yearly publication from the AAMC, *Medical School Admission Requirements*, which can be purchased from the AAMC website: [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org).
**Question:** Must I pursue an MD/PhD to continue conducting research?

Physician scientists may pursue clinical degrees in medicine or dentistry alone, or they may earn combined degrees (DO-MD/PhD or DDS/PhD). The National Institutes of Health (NIH), for example, funds several combined degree programs, such as the medical scientist and the dentist scientist training programs. For physician scientists who conduct research with a medical or dental degree alone, four years of clinical training are required while combined degree programs typically take 6 to 8 years.

Devotion to the research enterprise is a highly valued quality in candidates. Most training programs will look for evidence of significant research experience prior to entering medical or dental school. Significant research experience could include a year or more spent in a research laboratory or an undergraduate research thesis resulting in national presentations and/or publications. A few months or weeks of part-time research is unlikely to indicate a passion for research to admission committees. For more information, visit: [http://www.physicianscientists.org/](http://www.physicianscientists.org/).

**Question:** What are other health profession options?

Some of the more popular health professions (allied health sciences) include, but are not limited to, dentistry, veterinary medicine, nursing, pharmacy, optometry, podiatry, public health, and the therapies (physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy). The OAA website features a document titled “Health Professions Online Resources”, which contains links to the various health professions’ association websites. For more information, visit: [www.explorehealthcareers.org](http://www.explorehealthcareers.org).

**MEDICAL COLLEGE ADMISSION TEST (MCAT) AND DENTAL ADMISSION TEST (DAT)**

**Question:** When should I take the MCAT/DAT?

It is recommended that students take the appropriate standardized test soon after completing the prerequisite requirements. Scores are valid for three years in most instances. If a student wishes to attend medical or dental school immediately after graduating from Rice, the final opportunity to take the test is August following the junior year. Though still in time to be considered by most schools, students may be at a disadvantage because with rolling admissions many applicants have already been invited for interviews. Earlier test dates are advised instead.

**Question:** How can I register for the MCAT/DAT?

For more information and to register for the MCAT, visit: [www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat](http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat).

**Question:** How do I study for the MCAT/DAT?

Studying for the MCAT or DAT depends on a student’s particular study habits. If a student is disciplined, they can begin studying independently by reviewing biology, general chemistry, and organic chemistry (the MCAT also tests biochemistry, physics, psychology, and sociology). In addition to free and low-cost resources, the AAMC publishes *The Official Guide to the MCAT Exam*, which can be purchased through their website: [https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/prepare/](https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/prepare/). The ADA publishes the *DAT Guide* and offers a complete DAT Practice Test, which can be purchased through their website: [http://www.ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test/](http://www.ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test/). Students can also purchase one of the study books released by commercial sources (e.g. Kaplan, The Princeton Review, Examkrackers). If a student will be more motivated by taking a course, there are a variety of commercial courses available throughout the year.

**Question:** What are the advantages and disadvantages to taking the MCAT/DAT more than once?

Ideally, students score their greatest possible score the first time they take the test. Therefore, students should prepare thoroughly. However, it is not uncommon or detrimental to take the test a second time. Taking the test a second time allows for targeted preparation based on identified weaknesses and increases the likelihood of improving a score. However, preparation is absolutely critical if taking the test a second time. Clearly, performing worse the second time around is not looked upon favorably.

**Question:** How important are grades and standardized test scores in admission to medical/dental school?

For admission to medical or dental school, students must have strong grades and test scores. A student’s science grade point average is of particular importance and includes coursework in biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. However, strong grades are simply a statement of scholastic achievement. There is no clear boundary. As a general rule, students should strive for both a cumulative grade point average and a science grade point average above 3.50. The average MCAT of Rice students has been consistently above the national mean. Also, remember that the greater the competition to a particular school, the higher your grades and test score must be for you to be a competitive applicant.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calendar Year</th>
<th>Mean Grade Point Average</th>
<th>Rice Mean MCAT Score*</th>
<th>National Mean MCAT Score*</th>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The AAMC began administering a revised version of the MCAT with a new score scale in April 2015.*
Yet, acceptance to medical and dental school is not based on numbers alone. It is based on a holistic evaluation that includes grades, standardized test scores, recommendations, extracurricular involvement, relevant health care experiences, state of residency, motivation, and the impression of the candidate by an admission committee during an interview. Indeed, the MCAT score scale emphasizes the center of the score range rather than the top third because students with scores at the center of the scale have historically performed well in medical school. The scale is intentionally designed to draw attention to applicants who might otherwise be overlooked and supports the holistic review of medical school applicants.

ADMISSIONS

Question: When do I start the process of applying to medical/dental school?

At Rice, the process unofficially begins when a student opens a file with the OAA typically during the fall of junior or senior year. For more information, view the “Open File Information for Applicants” on the OAA website: http://oaa.rice.edu/open-file/. However, the process officially begins when a student starts to complete the web-based common applications to professional schools at the beginning of the following summer. The common application services include:

- Texas Medical and Dental School Application Service (TMDSAS) – http://www.tmdsas.com/
- American Medical Colleges Application Service (AMCAS) - https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/amcas/
- American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service (AACOMAS) - https://aacomas.liaisoncas.com/applicant-ux/#/login
- Associated American Dental Schools Application Service (AADSAS) – http://www.adea.org/dental_education_pathways/aadsas/Applicants/Pages/default.aspx

Question: What is the timeline for admission to medical/dental school?

As mentioned in response to the previous question, the application process begins with opening a file during the fall semester of junior or senior year. Around this time, letters of recommendation should be requested for receipt by the OAA by May 15. Curriculum vitae and draft personal statements should be submitted to the OAA by January 31, and an appointment for an informational interview should be made before April 1. By early to mid-summer, web-based common applications should be completed. Texas state medical and dental schools invite applicants for interviews primarily during the fall while interviews at out-of-state schools often continue into early spring. Applicants may learn of their admission decisions at various times throughout the year.
**Question:** What if I am not ready to apply by the time I graduate?

Each year, a good number of Rice students decide to wait on applying to medical or dental school. In fact, the average age of all applicants to medical school is 24, indicating many applicants opt to wait until after graduating from their undergraduate institution. A student’s “gap year”, as it is often called, provides the opportunity to engage in experiences that may not have been available during the undergraduate career. It also provides time to do things that will not be possible after matriculating to a professional school. Students often choose to pursue work in their field of study, gain more clinical exposure, or travel, work, or study abroad. It is also not uncommon for students to take some time off to teach or conduct research. Admission committee members look for maturity, exposure, and breadth of experience. For this reason, as long as the time before applying is spent productively, it can augment an application. The impact of these experiences is something students can discuss during interviews or in their personal statement.

**Question:** What are the differences between AMCAS and TMDSAS?

AMCAS is the abbreviation for American Medical College Application Service, while TMDSAS represents the Texas Medical and Dental Schools Application Service. The most obvious difference is that TMDSAS applies only to Texas state schools (all schools except Baylor College of Medicine which is a private institution). TMDSAS accepts application submissions starting at the beginning of May as compared to the beginning of June for AMCAS. TMDSAS has two unique sections in which applicants identify co-curricular activities and a “Special Experiences” section for any further information not previously mentioned. Additionally, the TMDSAS personal statement allows slightly fewer characters than AMCAS.

**Question:** What is a personal statement?

The personal statement is the application essay. For example, the AMCAS prompt is: “Explain why you want to go to medical school.” Each applicant is given approximately 900 words to provide an answer to admission committee members. Ultimately, the personal statement should convey the applicant’s passion and commitment to becoming a physician or dentist. This assertion should be supported by academic, clinical, volunteer, and personal experiences acquired during their undergraduate career. Rice’s Center for Written, Oral and Visual Communication will provide applicants with feedback on their personal statements. To schedule a consultation, visit: [http://cwovc.rice.edu/home](http://cwovc.rice.edu/home).

**Question:** How do I request letters of recommendation from professors?

When a student opens a file with the OAA, waivers are provided for students to give to their letter writers. Letters should be requested from at least one science professor, a major subject-area professor, and another mentor/advisor. To request a letter of recommendation from a professor, a student should schedule an appointment to ask the professor if s/he is willing to write a letter. If the professor agrees to write the letter, the student should provide an unofficial transcript, curriculum vitae, draft personal statement, and waiver in a folder marked “Letter of Recommendation”. After the letter is completed, students should send a thank you note and update the letter-writer on their admission status. After all letters are received by the OAA, the Health Professions Advising Committee (HPAC) will write the committee letter based on the individual recommendation letters, curriculum vitae, draft personal statement, and informational interview.
**Question**: What are good sources for investigating my options and choosing schools to apply to?

The AAMC website is a good source of information on various medical schools: [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org). Additionally, the *Medical School Admission Requirements* (MSAR) is an AAMC publication that offers a wealth of information to help make the decision and can be purchased on the AAMC website. Likewise, the ADEA publishes the *Official Guide to Dental Schools*, which can be purchased from the ADEA website: [www.adea.org](http://www.adea.org).

**Question**: What if I am not accepted by any of the schools to which I apply?

Students should formulate a back-up plan from the beginning of their undergraduate career. If rejected after the interview process, follow-up communication with the admission committee often gives the student valuable feedback, allowing them to improve their application. Also, they should evaluate whether they really desire to become a physician or dentist. Sometimes, students overlook other allied health professions that could otherwise attract and maintain their interest.

**Question**: How do I finance medical/dental school?

The AAMC website features “Financial Information, Resources, Services, and Tools (FIRST)” at: [https://www.aamc.org/services/first/first_for_students/](https://www.aamc.org/services/first/first_for_students/). Texas has the Joint Admission Medical Program (JAMP), for economically disadvantaged students who want to go to medical school. See more information at: [http://www.utsystem.edu/jamp/homepage.htm](http://www.utsystem.edu/jamp/homepage.htm).


**ADVISING MEETINGS**

**Question**: When should I meet with the OAA for health professions advising?

Health professions advising at Rice is handled by an entire community of advisors. During O-Week, new students are introduced to Divisional Advisors (pre-major faculty advisors), Peer Academic Advisors (PAAs), student O-Week Advisors and Co-Advisors, and Major Advisors (faculty) from every academic department. Each has significant training and/or resources provided by the OAA regarding health professions. Most student questions can be answered accurately and efficiently by asking any member of this large community, many of whom are readily available in the residential colleges. However, if students need additional assistance regarding health professions, they should call 713-348-4060 to set an appointment with one of six Official Health Professions Advisors registered with the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). While most students may be interested in medicine, information is also available about related fields, such as dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, public health, and other allied health programs.

In early fall, the OAA hosts a Health Professions Advising Orientation as well as Sophomore Information Sessions. For juniors and seniors planning to apply in the upcoming application cycle, the OAA hosts Open-File Sessions. For details, please see the OAA website at: [http://oaa.rice.edu/pre-health/](http://oaa.rice.edu/pre-health/).