



Why the MCAT Matters

By Andrew Leibs

Numbers don't lie, but for medical school applicants, they're not the last word, either

The Medical College Acceptance Test (MCAT) is important — no question about it. But quantifying just how important it is for placement in medical school or graduate-level health care education — whether in terms of raw score or its weight within your application — is a tricky business.

There are a few agreed-on generalities: high scores can help, low scores can hurt, it's never too early to start studying, and it's seen as a stronger predictor of a student's success than most other graduate entrance exams.

The MCAT is more crucial for placement to aspiring clinicians than, say, the LSAT is to aspiring lawyers based on competition for spots and how it correlates to the profession's final licensing exams. The MCAT is actually more like the Bar Exam, given the level of scrutiny and how closely medical school courses are geared towards passing the boards.

You can reach a more practical and empowering perspective by looking at the MCAT as admissions officers do.

Schools seek the best students. In the health sciences, this means those who are more likely to complete programs and become certified to enter clinical

practice. The MCAT provides clues on which students are likely to drop out, finish on time, and pass their licensing exams on the first try.

Specifically, students who do well on the MCAT's "Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems" section are more likely to pass Step 1 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE).

So in one sense, a high MCAT score can get you in because it shows you can get out.

MCAT scores are also a key component — and one of the few admissions officers can control directly — of medical school ranking in consumer publications such as *Barrons* and *U.S. News & World Report*.

Still, assigning values or meanings to specific MCAT scores is illusive. For example, despite the USMLE correlation, most schools weigh the "Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills" (CARS) section (a perceived indicator of a student's ability to learn and communicate) more heavily than the Biology section.

And many institutions, including the College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific at Western University of Health Sciences, emphasize the interview more than any other factor when evaluating students. Many talks are done "blind," with interviewers not even knowing a candidate's MCAT score or GPA. Demonstrating interpersonal skills (crucial for interacting with patients) is far more important.

Then again, if your MCAT score is too low, you might not make it to the interview stage. The University of California system's medical schools screen applicants based on GPA and MCAT scores before they send secondary applications.

The national MCAT scoring average for the three science sections is 24, 28 for matriculated students. But there is no "magic number" that spells acceptance or rejection. You can overcome a low score if the other parts of your application, e.g. GPA (overall and in science courses), letters of recommendation, extra curriculars, are strong.

Strive for the complete package, but bear in mind that whether it's the MCATs or pre-exams for nursing and pharmacological studies, grades

matter, even at this stage, and how well you do on standardized tests can enhance your placement in graduate programs.

Tips for Prepping

The MCAT is a crucial enough exam to warrant strategizing, including investment in study aids and restructuring your schedule (e.g., taking one fewer course in your final semester) to free up additional study time. Here are three tips:

1. Plan to Study a Lot: View the MCAT as the mother of all finals, drawing on everything you've learned in all your science courses. It's never too early to start reviewing, and hard to study too much. Most students prep between 200 and 300 hours. Inadequate preparation is cited as the main reason that forces 50 percent of students to retake the test.

2. Explore All Study Aid Options: Experts recommend using a variety of study aids. Many students sign up for Kaplan MCAT prep courses, offered as in-person and online classes (\$2,299 each), self-paced (\$1,999), or via private tutor (\$3,999). Kaplan also administers diagnostic tests that can give you a sense of what the MCAT is like and where you need work.

Another popular study aid is mobile apps. Many are free and let you create interactive flashcards for memorization and review on the go. Most apps have built-in test questions, track your progress (i.e., they remember wrong answers), and enable you to skip past material you've mastered. This feature is helpful as you strive for balance in each section of the test. For example, scores of 11, 11, and 12 may be looked on more favorably than 14, 11, and 9, even though both yield the same composite score.

Review books are also popular. You can multitask and fight reading fatigue while studying by listening to e-books, notes, and lectures on your mobile device with built-in screen readers (VoiceOver in iOS), literacy software such as Read&Write GOLD, and apps like Learning Ally.

If you have a documented print disability, Learning Ally — which serves both visually impaired and LD students — offers downloads of audio editions of popular study guides you can listen to on an iOS device. Titles include the full Kaplan MCAT Test Prep Series (Critical Analysis and

Reasoning Skills; General, Bio- & Organic Chemistry; Physics and Math; and Behavioral Science), Jonathan Orsay's ExamCrackers series, and Barron's *MCAT Medical College Admission Test*, available in print for a penny on amazon.com.

Finally, the Association of American Medical Colleges sells practice MCAT tests, which you can also purchase from organizations such as the Princeton Review.

3. Take it Early: If you hope to enroll in the fall, take the MCAT no later than April. This will insure your application is complete when schools begin their screening process. An incomplete application; e.g., awaiting August MCAT scores for September enrollment, puts you at a big disadvantage, as fewer spots remain open as the year progresses.

Tips for Test Day

The MCAT is computer-based and comprised of sets of multiple-choice questions and two writing samples. The exam always starts in the morning and lasts 7.5 hours.

Travel Light: The only item you may bring into the exam room is your photo ID. Once seated, you're not allowed to remove any outer clothing, such as a jacket or a sweater — so plan accordingly. It should go without saying that all electronic devices (cell phones, tablets, calculators, etc.) are prohibited. All violators are reported by name to the AAMC.

Relax: Tough advice, to be sure, but two MCAT rules might make you breathe a little easier. First, if you don't know an answer, guess. You're not penalized for incorrect answers on multiple-choice questions, so a guess is better than a blank. Second, if you fear you won't score well, you can void (i.e., not submit) the exam at any time while taking it or within five minutes after finishing the last section. You can then sign up for a future test.

Do-Overs: If you wish to retake the MCAT, you must wait two days after your initial test before registering for a new one. The test is offered 25 times per year at Prometric testing centers throughout the US. You can take the MCAT up to three times per year with no lifetime limit.

Your Scores: The three main sections, verbal reasoning, biology, and physical sciences, have a scoring range of 1 to 15. A total composite score ranges from 3 to 45. Scaled results (raw scores are not disclosed) are available approximately 30 days after the test via AAMC's MCAT Testing History (THx) web app, which is also used to transmit scores to medical schools. You will not receive a hard copy of your scores.

Releasing Scores: At the end of the exam, you have the option to not release your scores to prospective schools. Don't do this unless you feel you did poorly and plan to retake the test.

MCAT Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Students with physical, sensory, and learning disabilities can request accommodations from AAMC to make the MCAT more accessible.

Accommodations may include: extended time, stop-the-clock breaks, adjustable height workstations, or enlarged text. Requests are reviewed on an individual basis.

All applications must include a cover letter detailing your disability and how it limits you in areas beyond test taking and a current, comprehensive evaluation of your condition from a qualified expert. All parts of your application should be mailed together; i.e., avoid separate mailings from third parties. Fax and email applications are not permitted.

Applicants should go through Western University's Accommodation and Resource Center (AARC) to ensure all parts of their applications are complete and current.

Resources

Here's a list of website links to resources referenced in this article.

AAMC Official MCAT Site

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/>

United States Medical School Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 1
<http://www.usmle.org/step-1/>

Top Medical Schools for 2017
US News & World Report
<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-medical-schools>

College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific, Western University of Health Sciences
<http://www.westernu.edu/osteopathic/>

Kaplan Test Prep MCAT Courses
<https://www.kaptest.com/mcat>

Read&Write GOLD, Western University article
<https://www.westernu.edu/bin/cdihp/read-and-write-gold.pdf>

Learning Ally app
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/learning-ally-audio/id418888450?mt=8>

The Princeton Review (MCAT sample tests)
<http://www.princetonreview.com/medical/free-mcat-practice-test#!practice>

MCAT Scores on AAMC
<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/mcat-scores/>

Requesting MCAT Accommodations from AAMC
<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/application-time-frames-and-types/>

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