

## **PROFESSIONAL ADVISING LEADERSHIP TRAINING - 2008**

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When deciding on a College major, most international students opt for a career in medicine. Only a selected few ever get admitted into medical schools. When I was nominated for the PAL program and had the opportunity of choosing a topic for my research, I chose medical school Admissions. I wanted to investigate the medical school admission as it affects international students and find out why only a few matriculate in this field.

My objectives are to come up with ways to improve the chances of getting accepted while paying special attention to the interview process. I decided to focus on the interview process because I believe it is the most unpredictable of all admission requirements and based on other people's assessment. I came up with a plan to visit Medical schools that matriculate and those that do not accept international students.

Twelve advisers participated in PAL 2008. The program started in Washington, DC with various workshops. We had sessions on self assessment, an opportunity to identify my strengths and weaknesses. Sessions on leadership skills, time management, organizational skills and most important, communication skills. This was a useful tool that came in handy during my numerous appointments at the universities.

The reception and the enthusiasm from my various appointments were mixed. Some of my contacts were really looking forward to meeting with me; they understood the purpose of my visit, had information about my country and had read my bio. For the other appointments, I had to explain my mission as well as explain the concept of EducationUSA. My advice to other PAL fellows is to take their country fact sheets to all interviews. I had a situation where my interview was almost turning into a political discussion. My contacts would rather discuss my country and her problems than focus on my mission which was to get information on their admission policies. Advisers should watch out for situations when you have to remind your host why you are there and get your interview back on track. I have a strong feeling that because of the peculiar nature of my topic and the fact that only a very small percentage of our students matriculate, some of my contacts were not too eager to spend much time discussing a policy issue that cannot be changed in the near future.

While planning my program, I opted to visit mostly medical schools in the New York area because of the number of medical schools in that state and the uniqueness of some of the programs.

#### **Institutions visited**

Weill Medical College of Cornell University  
Office of Global Health Education, Weill Medical College of Cornell University  
St. John's University  
University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey (not available) e-mail contact  
Stony Brook University  
NY Medical College  
Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education, CUNY  
Mount Sinai School of Medicine, NYU  
Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine  
George Washington University (e-mail contact)  
Howard University

During my PAL program, I quickly came to the conclusion that getting into medical school in the United States, for any student, is a highly competitive and uphill battle and it is even more challenging for international students. Out of the 125 medical schools, only 50 matriculate international students. The private Medical schools are open to accepting our students compared to the state institutions. Any international student who is willing and determined to go through with this process should not be discouraged by the low acceptance rate.

An example of an institution that would not matriculate international students is Sophie Davis school of Biomedical Education. Sophie Davis accepts only New York residence. It was established to educate under-represented minority students, from the state of New York, to become medical Doctors. After graduation, the doctors are bound to work in the under served communities of New York. Sophie Davis runs a highly intensive accelerated 5yrs program, 3 yrs undergraduate education and 2 yrs of Medical school. Students then transfer to Medical schools like Stony Brook and Dartmouth to complete the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years, no MCAT is required, yearly tuition is \$4,000!!!! New York mapped out a plan to take care of its citizens, a plan that cannot accommodate international students.

When I started my PAL, I was of the opinion that the interview process was the biggest challenge facing an international student and was hoping to come up with a best practice for success. I was way off target. I have come to the conclusion that our students have to work at every aspect of the admission process. When applying to those medical schools that matriculate international students, know that the process is expensive, it requires total commitment, maturity, intellectual ability and students will be under a lot of pressure. The International student has to be, more or less, better than the best US citizen applying to the same school!

The following are some suggestions that will help when advising students;

**They don't have to be science major to go to medical school.**

The medical profession is interested in diverse educational backgrounds and appreciates students with a variety of talent and interest. Regardless of what a student's major is, advise them to take the Biology, General and Organic Chemistry, Physics, Math and English requirements and have a good GPA. Graduating with a 4.0 would help a great deal!!

**Consider where you have the best chance of enrolling.**

Advise students to research and apply to med schools that will be the best fit, especially those private schools that have funding e.g. Duke, Yale, Vanderbilt, etc. However, students must have all it takes to get in. State institutions favor U.S. citizens and state residents whose taxes fund the institution.

**It is wise to take the MCAT once.**

MCAT can be taken 22 times in a year, between January and September. Students should decide on when to sit for this test based on preparedness and application deadline. Applying to a medical school with rolling admission gives more leeway. Some schools look down on students who take the MCAT multiple times. Advise students to aim to score a minimum of 33. Students who can afford it should consider a commercial review course for better score.

**Perfect your personal statement.**

Encourage students to be original and honest; make their statements fun to read, discuss aspirations, leadership qualities and what sets them apart. Submitting a well written polished personal statement proves the student pays attention to detail. Don't forget that as medical doctors they have to write prescriptions and put information in patients' charts. There is no room for errors.

**Prepare for the interview.**

The interview is an elimination process. It is meant to verify all the information submitted on the application as well as to determine how well students make decisions under pressure and whether they can think on their feet. Medical admissions officers are not looking for standard answers. They want answers that distinguish the applicant from the rest. Students should know current global health issues and be ready to discuss them. The panel is not looking for expert opinion.

**Decide who should write the letter of evaluation**

The evaluation should come from someone who knows and can speak well of a student's intelligence. It should be the Pre-med advisor, the university Pre-medical committee member or science department professor. It is important to choose the recommender carefully because this evaluation is a crucial part of an application. A scanty evaluation with bland comments will raise a red flag. This is other people's opinion about the student's motive and personality. Submitting a profile to the recommender will be helpful

because it will have other information about the students that the recommender might not know about, like hobbies, other interest and experiences.

### **Internship counts**

Advise students to volunteer or do internships that would put them in a hospital setting. They should job shadow a medical doctor and experience what it takes to survive in the profession. This would help them experience the good and the bad side of the profession, and then decide if this is the right profession to pursue. This experience would be an added plus during interview.

### **Having a financial Plan is a key Factor**

Financing medical school will be a student's biggest challenge. During the medical school interview, the committee would need information on how the student plans to fund medical school. If your student is top notch, they have a chance of getting a scholarship. If not, make sure the student is ready to prove he or she has the ability to pay \$200,000 or get a cosigner who is an American citizen. Students are not eligible for government or non-government loans. These are some useful websites for financing Medical schools:

<http://internationalstudentloan.com>

<http://edupass.org>

<http://salliemae.com/international>

<http://estudentloan.com>

<http://iefa.org>

<http://usastudyguide.com>

### **Involve others in your plan**

Students should take advantage of their college environment. They should make friends with Professors and classmates and discuss their plans for medical school. Professors might have tips, suggestions/ideas that could make a difference and put student on the right path. They might be familiar with faculty members on the interview panel. Classmates and other pre-medical students going through the same admission process could share information. Student will be surprised to know they are not alone in the struggle.

Doing all right things does not guarantee an international student will get into medical school either. Timing is the key to a successful application; when the economy is good, the numbers of medical school applications are low but when the economy is bad, there is an increase in the number of applicants. A booming economy allows students to pursue other careers that are in vogue.

I believe my PAL project would have been richer and more interesting if my topic was on "Alternative programs to Medical Schools in the US". I could have looked into health related programs that would give students opportunities to make use of their science subjects and still be in the health care environment. Many other programs like Microbiology and Immunology, Cell Biology, Experimental Pathology, etc are less restrictive and would accept more students into the program. Choosing other career path would spare students the agony and uncertainty surrounding the medical school admission. Other options could be;

### **An MD/PhD program.**

It always comes with full funding but the student must demonstrate an interest in research.

### **Physician's Assistant (PA).**

A PA is licensed to practice medicine with the supervision of a licensed physician. Before advising students to go this route, find out if this position exists in their country.

### **Postpone going to the United States until residency.**

Consider obtaining a medical degree in your country or outside the U.S., then apply for residency. Your chances are better if you are coming from a US affiliated Med school e.g. Cornell Medical College in Qatar.

### **Public Health**

There are so many areas to consider in this field.

### **Advice for future PAL**

Choose a topic that will be of interest to other advisers. Make sure the topic is manageable and not too broad. Have an open mind because your results might be different from your expected goal. Start early in the year to identify institutions you would like to visit for your research. Have a plan A and B. I would strongly suggest you don't choose cities so far apart, from coast to coast. You will wear yourself out just from traveling. Maximize your time at every stop you make. Start early in the year contacting your point persons on your A list and if you don't get the desired response, go to your B list. E-mail responses from your contacts could help you expand or limit the scope of your research. Solicit the help of the officers at College Board to identify contacts, they know everybody. Know yourself, if you function best working alone, that's fine. If you would feel more comfortable having other advisers in the same city with you, then make sure you send e-mails to your cohort and know where they will be visiting and plan accordingly. Be flexible, if you are free; go out with other advisers on their appointments. That unscheduled appointment could be your best source of information.

### **FOLLOW UP**

I will continue to research other available science courses that will give students more leeway. I will also do more research on Osteopathic medicine. I did not have a good opportunity to know more about this form of medicine. I visited only one institution in New York. It is fairly new and was not too impressive. (I saw more cadavers in their anatomy lab than students)!!

It is also a good idea to open up conversations between medical schools in US and our home governments to come up with some form of partnership. It will be nice to have collaboration like what Cornell did in Qatar.

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